Riders on the Storm

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/834786.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationships:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter, Abigail Hobbs & Will Graham, Abigail Hobbs & Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Alana Bloom, Abigail Hobbs, Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Garrett Jacob Hobbs, Jack Crawford, Beverly Katz, Jimmy Price, Brian Zeller, Mischa Lecter
Additional Tags:	Dreams, Mental Instability, The Murder Family, Established Relationship, Sequel to Hyacinth House, Mutual Masturbation, Biting, Anal Sex, Oral Sex, Original Character Death(s), Mentions of Rape, Hannibal Rising Spoilers, Food Porn, Philosophy, Art, Shower Sex, Bottom Hannibal, Trou Normand, Will Graham's Dogs - Freeform
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of Crystal Ship
Stats:	Published: 2013-06-08 Completed: 2013-07-11 Words: 94,497 Chapters: 13/13

Riders on the Storm

by bluesyturtle

Summary

Will struggles to stand on even ground with Hannibal in light of their relationship and Hannibal's true identity.

- Translation into Polski available: Jeźdźcy Burzy by erraticmuse

Unhappy Girl

Chapter Summary

Abigail tries to make a friend (not like Casson) and does therapy with Alana.

Chapter Notes

Unhappy girl, fly fast away/Don't miss your chance to swim in mystery/You are dying in a prison of your own device

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He's standing in the kitchen and smiling, talking to her mom while she chops an onion. It's their final moment before the world changes, before she loses them both forever. Her mom says something her dad laughs at, and the phone rings. And Abigail answers it, not knowing that it's the beginning of the end.

She hands her dad the phone, and like a whirlwind, her mom is bleeding and crying as he shoves her out of the house. Abigail runs back to the kitchen for the phone, but he catches her. He's fast; he always catches her.

The knife slashes through her neck, and Will Graham shoots him until he collapses beside her on the floor. When she turns to look there's no one there. Dr. Lecter is standing over her with the same bloodied knife she used to kill Nick Boyle. Will Graham places his hand on his shoulder. He says, "You told me you wouldn't do that in the house."

When she looks down there's no blood. Her scar is still there on her neck, but she's unharmed. In Dr. Lecter's free hand is a heart. It's Will's.

Will looks at it in with something unbelievable in his eyes like adoration, even as the gaping hole in his chest bleeds down his shirt and onto the carpet. Abigail scrambles away from the red mess at her feet.

"What did you do to him?" They look away from each other to look at her.

"He gave it to me." Dr. Lecter smiles, and Will kisses him. "It's ours to share." He offers the beating heart to Abigail, and she takes it. It's warm; it exudes life. Abigail bites into it, and Will falls to his knees beside Dr. Lecter. He brushes Will's hair back from his face and nods for Abigail to continue. She takes another bite, and Will screams, but he doesn't sound like he's in pain. He just sounds excruciatingly alive.

Dr. Lecter stops her just when his blood begins to taste sweet on her tongue. He takes the heart from her, and she spits pumpkin seeds into her hand the way Will taught her to. When she looks up the room has changed around them. They're back in the garden outside the psychiatric facility, and Hannibal is holding Will close to him on the red blanket. Will's chest is still hollowed out, and his skin is pale and sweating.

"Will he be okay?" She kneels in front of Will, taking his face in her hands like he is something fragile, something precious. She stains his cheeks with red. Hannibal touches her hair.

"We will need to hide him, until he is."

"Why not just tell the truth?"

"What will people think? His blood is all over your face, and your hands." Abigail looks down, and it's true; her hands are dripping with it, with Will's blood. They are in her room now, and Hannibal is sitting on the floor with Will. He stays there until the blood stops running, and Will's body convulses once with a final choked breath.

She jolts upright in bed and throws back the covers so she can lurch over the side of the bed and vomit into the trash can on the floor. She stays draped over the edge dry heaving and crying until there's nothing left inside of her. She falls back onto the tiny mattress, exhausted and confused, terrified by what she saw. She sobs once and turns her face into the pillow to scream.

Her body is in the same curled up position when she wakes in the morning. The corners of her eyes feel raw and puffy. She sits up and finds that the trash bag has been replaced.

The sun is just rising outside the window when Abigail goes to shower in the bathroom attached to her room. Some of the vomit dried in clumps in her hair as she slept, so she washes that first. She's always been quick with her showers, which means she can get away with just standing under the water for a few minutes and letting it rush down overhead.

She has a session with Dr. Bloom today. The woman will ask how group went the day before, if she's had any bad dreams, what she thinks about her dad now that she's written some more about him in her journal. Abigail will give the appropriate responses; she will not mention the dream about Will Graham and Dr. Lecter.

Since he helped her hide Nick's body, Abigail dreams about Dr. Lecter often. Her dreams take strange turns that she never anticipates. Sometimes they just sit together and drink hot chocolate, and he tells her stories she doesn't remember when she wakes up. Sometimes Dr. Lecter leaves the room, and she hears gunshots; her mom screams through it, and far off, a telephone rings. Sometimes Will Graham is there. Usually he's with Dr. Lecter, but a few times he's been by himself. In her dreams, Will is the one teaching her to shoot a rifle while Hannibal proudly looks on. When she makes a kill, Will hugs her tightly and spins her around, and she forgets that he's the one who had to kill her father.

She can't tell Dr. Bloom about her dreams because then she won't let them come to see her anymore. They're the only ones left in the world who care about her, who don't think she's

been tainted irreparably by her father. They're the only ones who can save her from the things she's done. They're the only ones who know who she is.

At first she didn't know why they would take an interest in her. She thought it was a fluke, thought they felt responsible for her because her parents were dead, and the rest of the world wanted to see her burn. She thinks it could be that still, but things have changed considerably since she woke up from her coma. Dr. Lecter takes care of her, and she's not his patient; Will comes to visit her every few weeks, or more than that occasionally, even though she heard one of the nurses say he lives somewhere in Virginia.

Dr. Lecter wants to take her in as one of his own, and so does Will. They're like fathers or maybe something far more complex than even that. She never expected their protection, but now it's the one thing left in her life that signals the possibility for a happier, brighter life in her future. She thinks anything would be better than rotting away in a hospital. No one here knows, or can ever know, the full truth of what she's been through.

Abigail goes downstairs for breakfast, and the food isn't half as bad as it could be. The eggs benedict are better than her dad ever made them, but the rest of it is lacking. She eats it anyway. Dr. Bloom will already be hearing from one of the night nurses that she threw up sometime last night. She doesn't need them pouring it in her ear that she might have an eating disorder on top of the bad dreams that she already isn't being fully honest about. When she asks what it was that she dreamed about, Abigail will tell her she dreamed about her father killing girls that looked just like her. It's usually the answer she gives; it's usually the truth.

Other times she dreams about the girls themselves. They're alive or they're dead, but either way they speak to her, and they tell her that she's evil. They call her a murderer, a cannibal, and a monster. They could have been her friends. She could have gone to school with them, studied for exams with them, or gossiped about boys with them, but they were dead. It was all they would ever be now, and it was her fault. She's all the things they accuse her of being and more.

She eats the cold hash browns on her tray, and the few patients who have wandered downstairs to have breakfast don't look at her. It figures that even as a celebrity, she's still ignored in a room full of people.

At around nine, more patients begin filing into the large cafeteria, and Abigail quietly makes her way out into the garden. She casts her eyes to the wall a few times and thinks about jumping it, but Dr. Bloom would hear about it and think she wasn't making progress. She would have to give up some of the things that made her feel normal for a while. They brought on too much attention, and any kind of attention in this place is negative attention. It would set her back, and she doesn't want to be here any longer than she needs to. It was already starting to feel like a permanent sentencing.

It's warm out in the garden. The sun is high in the sky, and only a few clouds line the distant horizon. She walks down the winding trail she walked with Dr. Lecter and counts the apples dotting a few of the branches as she goes by. They're blood red like Will Graham's heart in her hands.

Abigail makes her way to the end of the trail where Dr. Lecter picked an apple for her. He'd given it to her and said: *"An apple for knowledge."*

"Of good or of evil?" Abigail had asked when she took it from him.

"That is for you to decide." Dr. Lecter smiled at her, ever mysterious. She wondered where he was from that he spoke the way he did. He looked vaguely Scandinavian, but his accent was more Slavic its sound. She wants to ask, but she never does. It seems like something that will reveal itself with time, and she feels like she can wait. The question was on her tongue that day, but she had only laughed and tossed the apple into the air.

It makes her think about Dr. Lecter, about how her dreams of him could become so dark. He's a good thing in her life, and he's always done good things for her. He protected her from Jack Crawford and persuaded Will to do the same, though she doubts that was a difficult feat to accomplish.

She saw that things with them were different. They had been by a few more times since their picnic with Dr. Bloom. Dr. Lecter had cooked dinner for them and Freddie Lounds when they were still trying to talk her out of co-writing a book about the things that happened to her, and while Lounds didn't seem to notice anything amiss, Abigail could tell. She'd seen enough just that day when they'd gone up to meet her in her room before Dr. Bloom got there; Will stood closer to Dr. Lecter, touched him more often—subtly, but more than he ever did before. She did ask Dr. Lecter about that; it seemed more polite somehow than asking about his past.

"He seems happy."

"I believe he is."

"Is it because you're in a relationship?"

Dr. Lecter's expression was not one of surprise, though he did appear taken with her blunt choice of words. It might have been crass or rude coming from someone else, but she knew she could get away with it, more because of who they were to each other than because she was young and didn't know any better. She wasn't that young anymore, and she did know a little better than to ask questions where they weren't welcome. Dr. Lecter isn't an unwelcome person, not when it comes to her. He can't be after what they've been through.

"Do you sense a change in us?" He had asked while they were walking beneath the trees on their way back to Will and Dr. Bloom.

"You seem about the same, but there's a change in him." He had smiled small at that, either proud of his ability for discretion or amused at Will's inability for it. She suspected the latter.

Abigail stays out in the garden all morning, and no one troubles her. Closer to lunchtime, she goes up to the greenhouse where a few nurses are stealthily monitoring everyone's behavior. Only a dozen patients are allowed inside at one time because crowds can evoke mania in the more violent, unstable ones. Abigail's had to deal with a few of them since she's been here, though they mostly leave her alone now that she has people who come to see her from the

outside world. It's that, or they're afraid she'll kill them and eat their still-warm corpses. Being the daughter of a serial killing cannibal does have a few perks, apparently.

There are seven patients up in the greenhouse when she gets there. She recognizes three of the women from group and another woman, Cora, who sits with her sometimes in the cafeteria. There are two other men and a woman she doesn't know, older than her but not by much.

She takes one of the three empty chairs at the head of the table Cora's sitting at. She leaves a chair in between them. Cora looks up from her blue workbook and smiles at her, lips carefully pressed together. She hums in greeting.

Talking to Cora is one of the things Abigail does that the nurses tell Dr. Bloom about. It really is ironic how she's urged to speak of death and nightmares in group when a simple conversation with another patient is frowned down upon. Nurse Trudy is watching Abigail with her pen pressed to the clipboard propped in between her stomach and forearm. Abigail watches her right back and decides it might be worth it to give Dr. Bloom something else to talk about for once. She hasn't asked about why Abigail talks to Cora yet, but the nurses keep telling her every time it happens.

It's one of the only things left that makes her feel like someday she'll be able to be somebody different and not just her father's daughter. Will Graham and Dr. Lecter are two of the other things.

"Did you eat breakfast today, Cora?" Nurse Trudy scribbles furiously on her clipboard. Had she been a simple machine with a single lever, Abigail could not have timed it more perfectly. She hides her smile at the predictability of the staff here and watches Cora roll her lips together and nod once.

"Eggs benedict?" Cora blinks and shakes her head. "Oh, the croissants." Cora nods.

"Do those have egg in them?" She asks easy questions that require only a yes or no answer. This is the custom with Cora. She nods yes. "I thought they tasted pretty good today, for cafeteria food." Cora nods, her smile spreading just a little bit wider across her face. "I bet you could make them better." Cora bites her lip through her laugh and shakes her head. The movement tosses her pretty blonde hair across her shoulders like a horse shaking out its long golden mane. Cora is older than Abigail by a few years, but she looks much younger when she relaxes like this. The laughter dancing in her eyes affects her posture, the way she holds her head. Her laugh gives away just a whisper of what her voice sounds like.

"Excuse me, Miss Hobbs." Abigail looks up into Nurse Trudy's aged face, though she doesn't want to. "Miss Armistead was in the middle of her studies when you interrupted her." She sounds sweet and polite, but Abigail's heard it all before. She scares away anyone who gets close enough to talk to Cora, no matter what it's about and no matter what Cora's occupied (or not occupied) with. Abigail doesn't need to look down to confirm that she's studying trigonometric constants. She clocked the marked up unit circle when she first sat down.

“I’m good at math. My mom was a teacher.” It was part of what made her so agriculturally useful. She used to tell Abigail that math could be applied to anything. *“You might have to squint sometimes, but that’s pretty much the way it goes with anything in life.”*

“Are we going to have a problem, Miss Hobbs?” Abigail turns in her seat to find Nurse Diane standing over her. She holds her ground. Dr. Bloom will definitely ask about this in therapy.

“I just thought I’d check in with Cora and see if she’s okay.” She says innocently, dropping her eyes back to Cora. She’s shrunken back inside of her protective shell, all timidity and anxious fear. Abigail doesn’t know the way to help her back out while Trudy and Diane hover over them like this.

“That’s between Cora and her doctor, honey.” Abigail wants to tell Diane not to patronize her, but they’d only haul her out of the greenhouse like livestock, and she doesn’t want Cora to feel responsible for whatever action they try to take against her. “It’ll be lunch soon. Why don’t you go down and eat something? Such a skinny thing.” Abigail grits her teeth and reluctantly stands to her feet.

“Nguh.” Cora stands, too. “Hon’t go.” She snaps her mouth shut once she realizes she’s spoken.

Abigail can’t look anywhere else but at Cora, even as Diane is walking toward her and grabbing her arm. Cora has never tried to speak to Abigail before. Her eyes are big and shiny with tears. She falls into her chair and sobs into her hands when Diane takes her away, and Abigail can’t even act on the rage she feels toward Trudy and Diane for hurting Cora when she was finally beginning to open up. Diane is speaking to her in a harsh tone, but Abigail isn’t listening. She doesn’t care what she has to say about what just happened.

Her grip tightens a little bit around Abigail’s wrist, but she lets go when Abigail jerks away from her. She walks off into the cafeteria without waiting to be told. Diane says something behind her like, “Little witch.”

She wonders briefly what Dr. Lecter would say and assesses her lunch options. The specialty of the day is a beef and vegetable stir-fry that looks like a stew made from road kill and weeds. She avoids it and takes a plastic bowl of salad. She eats it plain and crumbles the crackers into the bowl after she’s done. It isn’t until much later that Cora comes down for lunch. Diane and Trudy aren’t with her, but the nurses stationed along the walls have been forewarned to watch her. Abigail can tell by the way they look from her to Cora and then to each other.

Abigail waits until Cora sits on the other side of the cafeteria alone with the road kill stew before she leaves. Her session with Dr. Bloom is in forty five minutes.

To pass the time Abigail returns to her room to write in her journal. She’s filled about half of the tiny pages with dreams she’s had of her dad. A few times she wrote about her mom and the memories they made together. She wrote down her account of the picnic with Dr. Bloom, Dr. Lecter, and Will Graham. It’s one of the happier things in her journal. She drew a smiley face next to the line, *Dr. Hannibal Graham or Mr. William Lecter? I wonder if they’ve discussed this yet.*

She's also thought about what her name would sound like paired with theirs: Abigail Lecter, Abigail Graham. Although she doesn't know how likely it is that they'll make a family with her after all now that they have each other, she likes the sound of both. The name Hobbs is stained by the things her father did. She carries it with her like a curse, like a birthright. She doesn't write these thoughts down in her journal. Dr. Bloom told her no one would read it, but there was really no way for her to know that for sure.

Instead, she writes tamer versions of her dreams, overly dramatic renditions of the fear she felt for her father, and calculated observations about the adults in her life, whether their interest in her is professional or personal and whether her interest in them genuine or fleeting. The feelings and the images are real; the histrionics are a strategically-employed façade. She will know if someone has read from her journal; she will be safeguarded against emotional blackmail if it comes to that, and she will be able to take it up with Dr. Bloom if it does because she knows a very different truth than the one Abigail's committed to paper.

It might reveal her as paranoid, but it could also cost a nosy nurse his or her job; if it did that, it would prove that she, in fact, isn't paranoid so much as she is one step ahead of the rest of them. She hopes it will be Trudy or Diane that takes the bait.

Until then, she has half an hour to kill before she needs to head downstairs and meet with Dr. Bloom. She takes up her pen and writes a haiku to fill the small rectangle of space left on the end of the page. She writes:

Come nightfall there's rain
The animals take shelter
Mourning brings sunlight

It must be frustrating to know this journal exists but be sworn against reading it, like having the forbidden answer key to an impossible test. She believes Dr. Bloom will not break her promise not to read it. It's other people she doesn't trust explicitly. She has no reason to; it shouldn't be a mark against her.

She makes her way downstairs and walks with a nurse to Dr. Bloom's office. She sits outside for five minutes staring at the blue sky through a small window above the bookcase at the end of the hall. A sniffling man steps out of the office and doesn't look at Abigail as he goes. A few minutes later, Dr. Bloom emerges from the room and smiles. She holds the door for Abigail to enter.

The office is bright with three big windows. Two are on the wall across from the entrance and one is around the left corner of the office near her desk. The drapes are thick and honey-colored to match the pale goldenrod walls. Abigail checked over the course of a few weeks when the doctor's back was turned, and none of them open. It's not that she wants to escape, especially; it's just nice to know that she could if the need arose. Her dad did teach her a few things apart from just shooting a rifle.

"Keep the trees at your back, Abs. No one'll be able to sneak up on you that way. Don't put yourself in a corner if you can help it."

Some days it had been more obvious than others that he was training her to hunt something bigger than deer, though she had never had to be anything more than deceptive with the girls he sent her after. He never left them alive long enough for them to go after her.

“How are you today, Abigail?”

“I’m okay.” She looks around the office, counts the three well-stocked bookshelves. She never knows how to handle herself in the warmly lit room. She paces over to the window in between one of the enormous shelves and the Whistler mounted on the adjacent wall. She spares it a glance before standing at the window and pulling back the drapes to look out. Dr. Bloom’s office faces a corner of the garden. It’s not a bad view. “Did the nurses tell you about Cora?”

“You know they always tell me about Cora.” Dr. Bloom answers evenly, sitting down on one of the armchairs facing the window.

“You never ask me about her.”

“Do you want to talk about her?”

Abigail shrugs vaguely. The answer is yes, though she doesn’t say it. She watches two men shoving each other in the garden. A male nurse breaks up their disagreement, and Abigail has the very clear thought that they should be allowed to settle their differences the way they want to, without interference from anyone else. Dr. Bloom stands to look out the window with her and catches the tail-end of the scuffle. She looks at Abigail and then back out the window.

“Cora Armistead has been here for a long time.” Dr. Bloom says after a moment. “What do you know about her?”

“She bit off part of her tongue and can’t talk well. Other than that, just that she scares easily.” Abigail shakes her head. “Oh, she’s studying math.”

“Your mother taught geometry.”

“Yeah.” Abigail turns away from the window and makes for the chaise lounge seated directly in front of the equally huge window on the other side of the bookshelf. She sits on the edge of it, not wanting to look like one of those stereotypical patients so commonly associated with this particular piece of furniture. Dr. Bloom passes behind the chaise lounge to situate herself in the corresponding armchair to the left of the window. Abigail wonders if they came in a set or if Dr. Bloom had them re-upholstered to match the room and each other. They’re pretty classy; dark beige in color with polished mahogany legs. This window faces over the wall at the edge of the garden. Abigail likes to sit here because she can watch the cars drive passed on the street.

“What do you and Cora talk about?” It’s a strange question for some reason, maybe because Cora never actually says anything—or hadn’t said anything in the past.

“I just ask her how she is, what she had for breakfast; that kind of thing.” Abigail says it like it’s no big deal because really, it shouldn’t be. “I feel like a freak when people ignore me.” She explains, rubbing the knuckles of her left hand with the thumb from her right. She sees Dr. Bloom nod a few times, slowly as if considering what the statement means on a deeper psychological level. Abigail just thinks it means that having a friend is a relief from the ostracism that has become a part of her daily life, but it’s only because she’s choosing not to look into it more deeply.

“Have you considered that your interaction with her might be doing more harm than good?”

“I figured you would tell me to stop if it were.” She looks up at Dr. Bloom and thinks she may have made a mistake being so forward, but Dr. Bloom only looks thoughtful. She can’t tell what else, if anything, she thinks of the admission. “The nurses don’t care about whether something’s good for her.”

“So you ignore their authority because you disagree with it?” This was a bad idea.

“They’ve never told me to stop talking to Cora altogether.” Abigail looks back out the window, watches a plane fly by. “It’s just whenever I approach her they find excuses to make me leave. They’re bullies.”

“Do you think taking it into your own hands is what’ll help her if they are bullying her?”

Abigail takes a deep breath and sighs, setting her hands in her lap and examining the blue of her veins beneath the skin. Dr. Bloom is watching her. She bites her lip.

“I thought I could help her feel less alone, more…”

“More normal?” Abigail looks at Dr. Bloom and then looks away. She stands to her feet and walks to the painting in the corner of the room; it’s The Monk at the Sea. The composition is predominantly gradient shades of blue. It pairs nicely with the yellow and beige color scheme of the room. She read about it once for an art class she took early on in high school; she thinks someone named Frederic painted it, but she can’t remember. “It’s okay to try and make connections with people, Abigail, but maybe Cora isn’t the one you should go to.” She says it gently like she expects it to hurt Abigail’s feelings more than it does.

“If not her, then who?” She’s only partially concerned with Dr. Bloom’s answer. Her thoughts are focused on Cora, on who she’ll reach out to if Abigail leaves her be.

“There are a dozen girls you meet with every week for group. They know more about you, and vice versa. It might be nice to talk with people who understand you better.”

“What if Cora does understand me better?” Abigail walks around the front of Dr. Bloom’s desk guarding the mosaic of diplomas framed on the wall behind it. She walks passed the knee-high statue of a Pegasus with flexed wings. It looks as if the animal is just taking off in flight as a half-naked woman desperately clutches at the horse’s sides; a stupid thing to do to a creature so wild in movement. Its powerful legs could easily trample her body and permanently cripple or paralyze her. Abigail keeps her thoughts to herself and keeps walking. Dr. Bloom keeps pace with her a few steps back.

“You would never know exactly how she felt about you.” Dr. Bloom notes, running her hands along the spines of the books as she passes another deep red shelf. “Do you find that comforting?”

“I would know how she felt about me,” Abigail ignores Dr. Bloom’s question as it doesn’t apply to her. “What she can’t say in words, she tells me in other ways.” She passes the door and halts to examine the fruit tumbling out of the basket in the painting. She knows this one is Cézanne. The apples are lumpy and multi-colored, and there’s an unfortunate-looking heap of bread on the table behind them that could be baguettes or éclairs. She thinks they’re baguettes, though now she really wants doughnuts. There are never doughnuts in the cafeteria; too unhealthy, too loaded with sugar.

“How does she tell you?” Dr. Bloom stops at Abigail’s shoulder and analyzes the painting. She tilts her head to one side as she looks on.

“She smiles or she laughs; sometimes I can tell that she’s letting me in.”

“And that makes you happy.”

“It does.” Abigail moves on from the painting and scans the third and final bookshelf along the neighboring wall. She reads some of the titles and the smaller author names: *Critique of Pure Reason* by Kant, *The Provincial Letters* by Pascal, *Rules of Reasoning* by Descartes, and *The Confessions* by Rousseau. “I thought it was okay to make other people feel better.”

“It is, within an appropriate context.”

“You’d call this inappropriate?”

“For right now, I would.” Abigail turns to make eye contact with Dr. Bloom before continuing onto the Whistler painting. She stares at it for a long time, unable to remember how she came to know the artist’s name. She thinks the title of the painting might have something to do with whistling, and that’s why it stayed with her. “I’ll speak to the administrator about the way the nurses have been treating Cora Armistead. Until then, I think it would be best if you kept your distance from her.”

“But why?” Abigail faces her. She really does want to know. Dr. Bloom sighs.

“I can’t tell you the specifics.” She hedges. “You should just know that the staff has her best interests at heart.” Abigail thinks about Nurse Diane squeezing her wrist too tightly and then calling her a witch as she walked off. That kind of behavior would fly with cattle or with a dog, maybe, but Abigail, and Cora, are neither of those things. She doesn’t mention it to Dr. Bloom. She doesn’t see an immediate need to do so.

Abigail thinks to ask what to do if Cora approaches her, but it doesn’t seem like she will have a problem with that. Dr. Bloom doesn’t mention it either, so she migrates wordlessly to the armchairs across from the Whistler painting and sits in the one closer to the large window. The sun at half past noon illuminates the warm yellow walls and creates a soothing glow to bask in. Dr. Bloom sits across from her and crosses her legs.

“The nurses told me you were sick this morning. You look better now.”

“I had a bad dream.” Abigail says, purposely trying for ambiguity. Her doctor picks up on it.

“Your father?” Abigail thinks before answering. She thinks of Will’s heart throbbing grotesquely in Dr. Lecter’s hand, gushing blood out over his thick carpenter’s fingers. She remembers the scene as vividly as if it had happened in the real world, as if she had tasted Will’s coppery blood and the viscous meat of his heart as it pumped unrealistically against her lips. She scrubs the knuckles of one hand across her mouth where it feels bloody with the memory. “Abigail?” She starts.

“Um, yeah.” She nods, averting her eyes. “My dad—he…” She puzzles over her words. “We killed someone that we loved.”

“Who was it?”

“My mom, maybe. I don’t really remember. It must have been her.” It must have been her screaming in her dream and not Will. It must have been her dad holding the knife ready to kill her, not Dr. Lecter waiting to feed Will Graham’s heart to her as if it were a truffle or an apple—a bright red apple: *“An apple for knowledge.”*

“Why do you think it was her?” Dr. Bloom leans forward.

“Because…it wasn’t like how he felt about the girls he killed, and I didn’t—I wasn’t invested in them the way he was. It went deeper than that.” Her breath catches in her throat.

“Deeper how?”

“It wasn’t about just loving her. It was about…” She furrows her eye brows together in concentration. The answer is there. It’s right there, glaringly bright and sparking on the underside of her tongue, but she can’t get to it. “It was about…invading her, almost.” Consuming him would have been an insult to Will’s pedigree. That had to have been it. Dr. Lecter wouldn’t be with someone if just consuming them was enough, if dominating them was enough.

Will Graham is suggestible enough to be transformed. He can become something that doesn’t need a heart to sustain him if his counterpart survives with him. That was it; that was the change she’d seen in Will, and since then, it had only solidified into something far more intricate and impossible to comprehend from just one side or just one frame of mind.

“Of good or of evil?”

Dr. Bloom nods in her chair. She says, “Do you think he killed those girls because he wanted to do that to you?”

“I still don’t know why he killed those girls.” Abigail murmurs, opting for the truth because she doesn’t know the right answer yet. “I know that he can’t hurt me or anyone else now that he’s dead, but thinking about what he did and why he did it…it scares me.” She shivers. “I can’t understand what he saw in me that made him the way he was, and *that* scares me.”

“Nothing you did explains or justifies your father’s actions.”

“That is for you to decide.”

“Jack Crawford doesn’t think so.”

Dr. Bloom looks intrigued by the turn in the conversation. She leans back in her chair and studies Abigail’s expression until Abigail drops her gaze and turns her head to the right so she can stare at the Cézanne instead of meeting Dr. Bloom’s eyes.

“It’s still an open investigation. Jack needs to follow all the leads.”

Abigail doesn’t have to look to register the slight disapproval in Dr. Bloom’s reply. She knows her face will be a well-contained, clinical mask if she looks, so she doesn’t. She keeps her eyes on the lumpy apples.

The apple Hannibal picked for her was perfect, deep red, and sweet on her tongue. She hadn’t even washed it; just sank her teeth into it straight from the tree, straight from its life source. *It’s warm; it exudes life. Abigail bites into it, and Will falls to his knees.*

Abigail swallows around the crisp taste of apples in her mouth and the false memory of blood and screams; it’s only false based on a technicality. Some of the blood and most of the screams are real, painfully real. Only Will’s scream had been imagined. She wonders how she created it in her mind, tries to guess at what parts of his speech and what chords she’d heard in his voice inspired the sound that tore out of his broken body like an exorcised spirit. She hadn’t thought herself capable of such inventiveness in the grim realm of the macabre. It shouldn’t surprise her, so it doesn’t.

“Do you know about Cézanne?” Dr. Bloom asks, following Abigail’s eyes to the painting on the wall. Abigail shakes her head no. “He changed the way a lot of people thought about perception; how we understand space and distance in paintings. Traditionally, overlapping and foreshortening help us differentiate between the subject of the painting and its lesser components through a careful construction of space on the canvas.” She explains what the term foreshortening refers to. “It’s when the artist makes a line shorter so the image appears reduced when we look at it.”

“So how did he change the way people thought about perception?”

“He would give a stronger presence to secondary objects so they were more pronounced than what we would expect to be the primary object. Markers that we find natural and fixed, he would switch their roles; a dormant ocean takes on the form of a giant tidal wave about to crash over a city, for example.”

“And the fruit?”

“Perspective.” Dr. Bloom answers readily. She’s enjoying this. “See how everything on the table looks ready to topple over?”

“The apples are lumpy.” Abigail nods.

“It’s because he painted them from a multi-point perspective. The shape of the fruit changes from every direction it faces and from every new angle it takes on.”

“I feel like you’re going somewhere really profound with this.”

“Well, now it would be too obvious.” Dr. Bloom smiles, and Abigail returns it.

“My mom used to do that.” She says quietly, looking away. Her eyes find the window this time. “But with math.”

“It has endless real-world applications.” She sees Dr. Bloom nod in the corner of her eye. “More than certain other things.”

“Like pumpkin seeds.” Abigail laughs, though she’s still thinking about human hearts and how they’re red just like the darkest red of an ambrosia apple. She grimaces around the definition of the word: delectable, immortality-granting, the food of the gods. *Dr. Lecter stops her just when his blood begins to taste sweet on her tongue.*

“He tried.” That does make Abigail smile more genuinely. Will did try, valiantly. Abigail felt guilty for snapping at him, for mocking his wish to be a paternal figure in her life. Even after her cruelty, he still put his career on the line to protect her from Jack Crawford—to protect her and Dr. Lecter both from Jack Crawford.

It was more than her dad had ever done for her. Even the best thing he could have offered her would have been eclipsed by all the wrong he did in her name. Will had every right to take his place if he wanted to. He had proven to her in making his decision and standing by it, however uncomfortable it must have made him, that he would be there for her whether she would have him or not. And that was what a parent did for a child, wasn’t it; provided shelter when it wasn’t sought for, offered love when it was undeserved. Will has every right. She understands her dream now; a simple literal manifestation of things she already knew to be true. Will had given Dr. Lecter his heart and wanted to give it to Abigail, too.

Like father, like daughter, she had eaten it. She had honored him the way her father by blood taught her to, and she had honored him the way Dr. Lecter had encouraged her to; the way Will had seemed strangely accustomed to, although he had died in her dream.

She is an orphan with two fathers, with blood connecting her to each of them and with secrets solidifying their bonds. Dr. Bloom says something, and Abigail perks up again, realizing she was staring off. “Will called earlier and said he wanted to come by today. I won’t object if you want a visitor, seeing as I just pronounced Cora Armistead as being off-limits.” Abigail nods.

“I want to see him.” She nods again to herself, touching her scarf compulsively where the scar lies beneath. She doesn’t ask if Dr. Lecter will be tagging along. She thinks it might be better, though she’d prefer to get Will alone.

There are a few things they need to discuss. The drive from Will’s home in Virginia is an hour long, so Abigail begins planning her words as soon as she leaves Dr. Bloom’s office. She sees a girl from group waiting in the hall and smiles cautiously. The girl, Jordan, she

thinks, smiles and ducks her head. Abigail walks back up to her room unaccompanied by hospital personnel and writes in her journal. The marker has been moved. She flips to a random page toward the back and writes:

Sometimes I think about waiting in the garden for Nurse Trudy when she takes out the trash in the morning and stabbing her with one of her pens. See if she writes that down on her clipboard.

She leaves the long red ribbon there on the page. She doesn't know much about fishing, but she knows what comes after the first bite; a little waiting, a little tugging. She'll have to wait to reel in her catch, but when she does, it'll be a beauty. It'll be worth whatever trouble she gets herself into if even the smallest reward of retribution comes with it. She wants the nurse, hopefully Trudy or Diane, who poked into her business canned. Failing that, she'll settle for getting egg on the offender's face.

She thinks it could be the environment, or maybe it's the company, making her more agitated and more starved for development, even if it's not positive. Everything about being locked up in Port Haven feels wrong and backwards. She wants to jump the wall; she wants to talk to Cora and tell her she's fine or that she will be if she isn't now; she wants to hurt Trudy and Diane for hurting Cora, for sabotaging her campaign to befriend the poor lonely girl.

At the risk of sounding too apologetic or too mindlessly grateful for her behavior toward him and for his actions, she wants to tell Will Graham that he can be her father if he wants to be, though she doesn't understand why he would, knowing what kind of a person she is and where she's been. She wants to tell him his predecessor set the bar so low that he could trip over it, but she thinks that might sound like an insult, and another low blow from her after what he's done for her would break his heart. To break something he's freely giving her would be senseless and wasteful. They need to talk about this, too.

She turns back to the earliest clean sheet in her journal where the lined pages have all been written in. She scribbles another haiku, sure that it's called something else when it's not about nature but not bothering to linger on it.

Ambrosial muscle
Bleeds red life and promises
We will honor him

Chapter End Notes

James Abbott McNeill Whistler's *Nocturne in Black and Gold: the Falling Rocket.*

Caspar Friedrich's *The Monk at the Sea.*

Agustin Querol & Adamo Boari's Flying Pegasus Sculpture.

Paul Cézanne's *Still Life with Basket of Apples.*

--
As always, chapter titles and song lyrics inspired by the mystical beings John Densmore, Robby Krieger, Ray Manzarek, and Jim Morrison, otherwise known as The Doors.

And also, bluesyturtle.tumblr.com

Love Street

Chapter Summary

Will visits Abigail at Port Haven.

Chapter Notes

She has wisdom and knows what to do/She has me, and she has you

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will Graham arrives twenty minutes earlier than she expected him, which makes her wonder if he was already in town or on his way when Dr. Bloom told her he wanted to come and see her. He comes in alone, freshly showered and wearing a green fishing jacket. The last time they saw each other was at dinner with Freddie Lounds, when he looked at her, and she could see that he knew. That was when Dr. Lecter promised they'd take care of her; when he promised Will would keep their secret.

She tucks the journal away in a drawer and sits up straighter on the bed. He shuts the door behind him silently and sits down near the window. A minute ticks by as he stares out at the walnut tree and tracks the ascent of a sparrow fluttering in between the branches to roost in its nest on a branch higher up than they can see.

Abigail reminds herself to breathe. Another minute slips away, and she stands to her feet. Her heart is thundering in her ears, though she has no room to worry about Will changing his mind. Dr. Lecter's promises weigh heavier in her chest than whatever fear her mind is begging her to acknowledge. She pushes it down. It doesn't matter anymore. Nick Boyle can't hurt her because they've found him, and Jack Crawford can't hurt her because Will won't let him. She stands behind him for a moment, wondering at what she should do, if he wants or expects her to do anything. His hands are shaking when he takes off his glasses, and somehow, that image decides her.

She places her hand on his shoulder, unsure if this is acceptable or wanted or appropriate but not knowing what else to do. He heaves a sigh and closes his eyes.

"Why did you kill Nick Boyle?" A chill creeps down her spine, but she doesn't remove her hand.

"He was going to kill me." She answers automatically, registering the muscles in his back when they tense up. Will turns to look up at her. She swallows around the rest of her answer.

He looks right into her eyes so rarely that when he does, her whole body locks up and waits for his next move. His eyes bore into hers like those of a wolf staring down its prey. It gives her the distinct feeling that he isn't alone, that they aren't alone.

"Abigail," He asks, voice devoid of menace, despite the incredible power he has over her in this moment; despite the truth he has seen of her. "Why did you kill Nick Boyle?" He enunciates just enough to relay the point that he won't be lied to again. He doesn't sound even a little bit judgmental, though he knows the extent of her guilt; she thinks it might be because he's made himself just as guilty in his hiding it from others. He shouldn't feel guilty. He only wants to protect her, only wants to do what he thinks is right. She drops her hand and sits across from him on the edge of the bed.

"He came to me and said he hadn't killed anyone; that he was being set up." Her skin pricks with a chill. His eyes dart down to catch sight of it as if he knew to anticipate it. Maybe he felt it, too; maybe he was doing that thing he did that helped him to understand serial killers.

"You didn't believe him."

"I thought—" She gasps, clenching the blanket in her hands. She licks her lips. "He looked desperate, like he thought I was the one who set him up or…like if he could just prove it to me, he'd be cleared."

"What were the words he used, the exact words he said to you?" Will's eyes are bouncing back and forth between Abigail's hands as if to reimagine the way she would have held the knife as it pierced Nick Boyle's body only once before ending his life.

"He said, 'I'm not going to hurt you. I didn't kill that girl.' And then I ran to get Dr. Lecter and Dr. Bloom, and he came after me." She takes a stuttered breath in. A tear escapes at the memory of what came next. "He thought I helped kill his sister." She shakes her head, scrubs at the wet streaks of tears down her cheeks and under her chin. "I was afraid of him. I thought he'd…I didn't know what he would do."

Will is silent for a long time; he doesn't look at her. Neither of them speaks into the silence. Abigail sniffles as quietly as she can. He doesn't seem fazed by the story at all. Dr. Lecter had probably told him the bare bones of it. He came here at all as a courtesy to her, not because he required a revised truth that would be easier to put on his conscience.

"And then what happened?"

"He pushed me into the wall, he begged me to listen to him, and I…" She blinks. Her hands feel warm and wet with Nick Boyle's blood; with Will's blood, too. She risks assessing his front for blood and finds none. Her hands are clean when she drops her eyes. "I stabbed him, and he stopped." She whispers. "He fell down, and he stayed there, and he left me alone."

"And then Hannibal found you."

"After he—" She stops herself, not knowing if she should mention what happened to Dr. Bloom. "When he saw the blood on my hands, he came down with me and saw Nick's body.

He said people would think I did it because I'm like my dad and not because it was self-defense."

"He was right." Will says, fatigued. He rubs his forehead with the back of his hand. He really does look tired.

"What do you think?"

"It doesn't matter what I think." His chuckle is derisive, self-deprecating. It makes her throat burn around the tears that would spill over if she hadn't forced herself to make them stop. She takes a steadying breath, but her words still come out choked and uneven.

"It does to me." His eyes don't quite find hers, but they linger around her cheeks where the tears have dried and left her skin sticky with salt. "And to Dr. Lecter." There's a change in his eyes then, something like sadness mixed with incredulity mixed with something softer and more delicate, something she saw in her dream: adoration. It makes her heart race, and she takes the dare. "He said you were going to take care of me."

"We are." He answers without missing a beat. His eyes find hers, and he means it. "We will."

They watch each other for a moment, trying to find dishonesty in each other but finding only bared vulnerability and hesitant trust. He sighs, softer this time. "I think when they found Nick Boyle's body, he was unarmed, and he had no self-defense wounds." Their eyes lock for a few seconds before he shakes his head and looks away. "But that doesn't mean you didn't kill him because you thought he might kill you."

"What does it mean?"

"It means Jack is gonna look that much harder for proof that you did it." They stare at the floor without speaking. Will takes his hand across the back of his neck, causing a few things in his back to pop when he rolls his shoulders. "And we'll fight for you that much harder." He says it almost nonchalantly like it's something as commonplace as a weather forecast. Abigail watches him stand to his feet, shrugging off the intensity of the conversation. "We should go for a walk."

She laughs at the abrupt switch, drawing her fingers across her closed eyes to take care of the final drying tears trapped in her eye lashes. He's watching her with a mildly apologetic expression that she doesn't understand. She stands and tucks herself into a light jacket.

"In the garden?"

"Dr. Bloom said I could take you into town for a while. I know you already had lunch. Coffee okay?"

"Yeah." She smiles as he holds the door for her. They go down the stairs together, and Abigail catches sight of Cora drawing lines in her workbook and looking frustrated. She doesn't notice Abigail watching her, and Abigail doesn't want to distract or upset her, so she goes on with Will out the main entrance. Diane is in the lobby sweeping, and she stares after them as they leave. Abigail wishes she didn't have to come back.

They're getting into Will's car and buckling up when she says it, that she wishes she didn't have to come back. Will swallows and nods once, solemnly. He doesn't speak, but she knows he feels the same way.

They go to a small, quiet coffee shop about ten minutes out from Port Haven. The street outside smells warm and rich from the roasting coffee, and inside, it only gets deeper and more luscious. It's like a blanket of vaguely chocolate-smelling aromas; she can name the bite of cinnamon, the subtle nutmeg that almost blends completely with the others, the subdued vanilla bean, and the pronounced caffeinated twinge of java and espresso.

She orders a simple café au lait, and Will gets a coffee with a double shot of espresso. She doesn't know if that's necessarily a good or a bad idea since he looks about ready to fall over anyway, but she says nothing.

They stand together and wait for their drinks. He tells her she can sit down if she wants, but she doesn't like the idea of leaving him on his own. If he's not standing right in front of her it's too easy to remember what he looked like covered in blood. She'd already seen him physically drenched with it; only it had been hers, and she had been the one dying.

Their coffees come, and hers has been augmented with a helping of whipped cream and a swirl of caramel. The barista who made it smiles shyly at her. He's tall and thin with tattooed forearms and a witch's streak in his thick black hair. She smiles back and laughs when Will looks over his shoulder at the man and clumsily whisks her away with one hand on her back. They sit down at a booth in a far corner of the coffeehouse. It's probably not a coincidence that their view of the register is obscured by one of the larger coffee makers mounted on the counter.

Abigail smiles into her coffee. Will doesn't say anything, too aware of how obviously he has been caught in the act of sheltering her from a harmless barista named Timothy, probably only a little bit older than her if at all.

"How are things with Dr. Lecter?" She asks when it seems tasteful to change the subject. He looks surprised by her inquiry. Dr. Lecter had to have told him that she knew about them. It's probably just his modesty that has him stammering and blushing like a schoolgirl.

"Things with Dr. Lecter," He ponders the phrase. He'd called Dr. Lecter by name earlier, so the polite address sounds funny coming from him now. He doesn't look like he means to answer.

"He makes you happy." She observes, cataloging the rash of red as it deepens across his nose and down his neck. He shrugs off his jacket and drinks his coffee. There's a tiny smile on his lips.

"What all did he tell you?" He is curious, and his question is vaguely conspiratorial. Abigail leans forward, eager to indulge.

"Well, I asked if something happened since the last time I saw you guys." She begins with a light smile on her face. "I thought you seemed different."

“Just me?” Abigail purses her lips at the incessant blush flowering on Will’s fair cheeks. He sounds so embarrassed, she wants to squeeze him.

“Just you.” She laughs at his frown. “Although, Dr. Lecter was kind of light on his feet; walking on air, you know?”

His frown softens, and his eyes take on an exuberant shine. It’s that same adoration he let her see earlier, and it’s joy, too. She wonders if maybe he always looked at Dr. Lecter like that, and that’s how she knew how to recreate in her dreams; she wonders if the articulate, graceful doctor always had a spot in Will’s heart that, romantic intent or no, touched everything that happened between them. Will catches himself staring off and shakes his head, biting his lip through a low chuckle.

“He didn’t say much about your relationship specifically, but he told me you were sick in Pennsylvania. That’s where you were, isn’t it?”

“In Williamsport.”

“Are you okay now?” Will thinks about it, eyes wandering off to the street beyond the window. These ones don’t open either.

“I feel relatively okay.” He hedges, not stating whether the issue has been resolved.

“What happened out there?” He sets his coffee down and straightens his back. A shaky sigh tumbles passed his lips and he scratches at his chin and his jaw uncomfortably. The words come as if they’ve been dragged out of him.

“I had a seizure.”

“Why don’t you go to the doctor then?” She recognizes the harsh irritated chord of her mother’s voice in her words. Will’s eye brows furrow once in a downward twitch and his smile stretches a little bit. Her motherly tone amuses him apparently. She tries again. “Dr. Lecter probably knows some really good neurologists that you could go see. What if you have epilepsy or…” She doesn’t know of many other diseases that cause seizures. She remembers a girl in her fourth grade class had a seizure in the playground one day during recess. It was a while after they moved to Minnesota that they heard about how she died from untreated meningitis.

“It was an isolated incident.” Will says slowly. “I was stressed out; I wasn’t getting enough sleep.”

“What if it happens again?” She can tell how badly he doesn’t want it to.

“If it happens again, Hannibal has a doctor lined up for me to see. All that’s left to do is make the appointment.”

“What if it’s not a seizure next time?” Abigail asks quietly, hating how real the likelihood is that Will could hurt himself or someone else even worse. Will stares at the table, morose. “Do you know what set it off?”

“I was looking at a body.”

“At a crime scene?”

“At a funeral. He was a cop.” He swallows compulsively and drinks his coffee with some difficulty. It’s still hard for him to speak about it. “He worked the case while we were there; killed in the line of duty by a suspect we were looking into: a woman.” He says mechanically as if he’s rehearsed the events of that day to himself again and again so he wouldn’t have to feel anything when he retold it.

“Did you know him?” She asks, trying to be sensitive without smothering him with sympathy. He shakes his head.

“Local guy. We exchanged a few words, but—” Will’s eyes fog over momentarily, and he blinks away whatever image he conjured up in his mind. “I didn’t know him personally. His boss wanted us to pay our respects, and I...I was looking at him when it happened.”

“You were *looking* looking.” He startles out of the haze of his memory. A shaky smile flashes across his face, briefly. It falls away in the next instant, and Will looks worn out anew.

“Yeah.” He whispers, tapping his fingers on the nearly emptied coffee cup.

“What did you see?” Will sighs and runs his fingers through his hair. He leans his elbows onto the table and blinks with his head in his hands.

“I was him, and she attacked me, and I was dying.” A knit works its way into his brow, and he looks up into Abigail’s eyes, not accusingly. “That’s how I saw you, too; how I knew what you did to Nick Boyle.” His voice is a murmur, too quiet for anyone else in the coffeehouse to hear. Abigail’s lungs tug on her throat, forcing her to suck in a breath of air. She turns her eyes to the window, guilty and ashamed of her guilt. Will’s hand covers hers on the table, but when she looks at him, his eyes are far away. He’s troubled; there’s something more on top of their secret that’s conflicting him.

His hand is warm if a little sweaty. It feels like an anchor. She wants to say that he can tell her what’s wrong if he needs to; he can tell her anything, and it’ll be okay because the worst is behind them. But he squeezes her hand once and then slides out of the booth to throw away their empty cups.

She stands reluctantly and goes with him to the car. Timothy is trying to get her attention from behind the counter, but she ignores him. They drive back in silence to Port Haven, and she fights the impulse to beg him to just keep driving until they’re far away from everything she associates with that place. There’s nothing tying her down there except rules and bad press.

She wants to go to Dr. Lecter’s and never leave. It’s the only place she has left that doesn’t feel like her father or like Nick Boyle. Everything else has been tarnished and defamed. Even Will and Dr. Lecter have been dirtied by the things she’s done; roped into the horror of all that she’s exposed them to by making them care about her. And they do care about her. Will cares about her, and Hannibal cares about her. More and more, she finds herself worried for

them and wanting good things for them; she finds herself thinking they'd be better off without her. She knows it's true, and knowing makes her heart and her bones ache. It makes her blood feel like ice in her veins.

But Will just drives her back to Port Haven, and he doesn't say anything. He doesn't tell her he's tired of trying to make this complicated, unconventional thing work. He doesn't say he won't be back for her sometime in the future. He invites her to dinner with him and Dr. Lecter, and she accepts before the full invitation is out of his mouth. He laughs at her enthusiasm, stunned by the weight and reality of it.

She doesn't ask if they can go to Dr. Lecter's now. If that were an option he would have offered. Instead he gets out of the car with her and walks her to the stairs that go up to her room. He waves awkwardly and turns to go, but she catches his arm and skips around his side to enclose him in a hug the way they always hug in her dreams when he isn't bloody or dying. He hugs her back after an uncertain, doubtful moment. If they were different people and if their circumstances were different, she can feel it in the way his arms tighten around her shoulders that he would bend his back just a ways, far enough to lift her off her feet and spin her around.

But they're not different people. They're exactly who they are, and they're murderers, and they've lied to each other and to the world for the sake of survival and for the sake of sticking together. Will releases her first and his smile is not exactly happy, but it's genuine. She's glad she hugged him. Someday he will pick her up and spin her around. That day is worth waiting for; worth the slow build it will take to get there.

"We'll be back to get you in a few hours."

"Okay." She nods and waits until he's walked out the doors to climb the stairs to her room. They'll be back, both of them, in a few hours. She'll only have to wait a while longer to leave this place again.

She returns to her room and hangs her jacket up by the door. The journal is untouched in her drawer, but the trash has been taken out. She ruminates over what she's memorized of the janitors' schedules and thinks this probably clears Oscar, the older man on the staff already mostly deaf and going blind on top of that. Oscar always calls Abigail Georgina and gives her flowers; she hadn't suspected him of foul deeds anyway, nor had she been worried about the janitors as a whole. Her business doesn't affect them as much as it does the nurses.

With a quick glance out the window, she recognizes Cora in the garden sitting cross-legged on the grass with a huge jacket swallowing up her tiny body. It's probably donated and looks too hot for the slight chill outside. It really doesn't fit her at all.

A nurse is sitting on the bench beside Cora speaking to her and leaning her elbows on her knees to watch Cora scribble in her workbook. Abigail wonders who put her up to trigonometry; if it was her doctor's idea or if one of the nurses did it so she'd look busy to the passerby. Abigail abandons the bedroom and goes back down the stairs to find the library, only mildly considering the cruelty of setting a person to trigonometry without a calculator. No wonder she looked so frustrated.

Trudy is sitting at one of the tables with a girl Abigail doesn't know. She looks up at Abigail and smiles, and Abigail forces herself to smile back, not wanting to start conflict where none exists.

The library is stocked with at least a thousand text books. Most of the other books are titles commonly taught in schools. Abigail can't decide on any one title, so she pulls a literature book off the shelf and takes it to a tiny table with one chair propped up against the side of it.

She flips open to the index and skims through page after page until she comes across "The Scarlet Ibis." She remembers it from high school but can't really remember what it's about apart from the eponymous bird itself.

It's a short story, only a few pages in length. It makes her pay attention because it's so concisely written. When the bird dies, she knows the story will end tragically. She lingers on the explanation of its death, on the lines that fall in between the animal's last breaths: *"It lay on the earth like a broken vase of red flowers, and even death could not mar its beauty."*

The boy's brother is the bird, of course. As soon as it dies, she knows he will, too.

When that moment comes, she feels it twist sharply in her heart. She can hear the little boy screaming in her mind all too clearly, *"Brother, Brother, don't leave me! Don't leave me!"*

But it's not really because of the story that her eyes well up with the tears and she has to stare hard at the wall until her vision clears. She cries because of the image of the broken boy hunched over with frothy blood staining his face and neck. There's a splotch of color on the page that indicates what a scarlet ibis looks like, and it blurs before her. She sees Will, curled up in Dr. Lecter's arms on the floor, twitching and sputtering and whispering, *"Don't leave me, don't leave me."*

She reads the third to last line of the story through the sheen of water in her eyes: *"I began to weep, and the tear-blurred vision in red before me looked very familiar."*

She closes the book gently and sits for a while longer. She wants to hurl the book at the wall, burn it, dispose of it. It feels incriminating, like anyone will be able to read the story and discover their secrets residing within the pages. She leaves the library a time later and slips into one of the restrooms. After checking to see that she is all alone, she allows herself to cry.

She cries because Will is a scarlet ibis. She weeps because she doesn't know what he considers home, but she knows he must be far from it. She cries because he is a beautiful creature in life, but he would be equally beautiful in death. She wants to find that thought repulsive, but it's somehow reassuring. Before she woke up last night from her dream, she had thought how lovely he looked with Dr. Lecter like they were sweethearts on their honeymoon. He hadn't looked gaunt or haggard as he was fading; he merely looked recognized, and bloody.

The first time she saw him he was bloody; he was shooting her father, he was rescuing her, and he was saying, *"No, no, no, no."*

She never knew what he was objecting to. Maybe he was speaking to her, or maybe he was speaking to her. *"I don't see. I don't. No, no, no, no. I'm not you. I didn't do this. Don't die on me. Don't let it be too late."*

"Don't leave me, don't leave me."

Abigail shivers and splashes water on her face. She leaves the building and goes to the garden again. Cora has long since vanished. Only a few people are out now. It's chilly outside, but she doesn't go back in for her jacket. She just sits in the sun on a warmed bench and watches some ravens fly by. She hears the onomatopoeic call of the whip-poor-will and marvels at the reverberations of the sound as it bounces from one edge of the garden to the other. She can't tell where it's coming from or if there's more than one.

Her lips taste like coffee and cream when she licks them. She needs Chap Stick. Someone taps her shoulder, and when she turns, she sees a tall woman; brunette, mid-twenties, strong.

"I'm Nadine, from group?" Abigail nods, and the woman sits down beside her on the bench. She brings one leg to rest on the concrete so she can face Abigail when she speaks. "I saw you talking to Cora earlier, but you weren't in the garden with her after lunch." Nadine has the airs of a gossip about her; better that than a bully, Abigail thinks.

"I don't want to set her back." Abigail inches back just so on the bench.

"You mean you don't want to set yourself back." Nadine's words are only slightly threatening, aided on by the fact of her impressive girth and hard eyes. "I've been there—trying to make friends, I mean."

"With Cora?" Abigail doesn't let it show that she's intimidated. She wants to know what Nadine's intentions are first. Nadine shrugs.

"With Cora, with Valerie—she does group, too." Abigail nods. "A few others. They don't like us talking to each other because we might rise up against them." She laughs at her own joke. Abigail laughs stiffly. "Hey, relax. I'm just messing with you." It takes every muscle and every ounce of control that Abigail has not to flinch at the playful thwack of Nadine's hand on Abigail's arm. She doesn't miss how her eyes light up a little because of it.

"Your dad killed girls, didn't he?" Abigail braces herself. She says yes.

"My dad was a scumbag, too." Nadine nods. "Not to pass blame or anything, but incest will kind of mess you up."

"I'm sorry." Abigail blurts out, at a loss for what the protocol for handling something like this is. She swallows and reconsiders her reaction and Nadine's words. "Who do you blame if not the offender?" Nadine's eyes sparkle with something akin to camaraderie. Abigail lets herself uncoil a little bit but retains some of the walls that separate them from each other just to be on the safe side.

"You don't blame anyone. You forgive." She answers tonelessly like a robot. She laughs, and Abigail laughs with her. It's easier this time because she doesn't sense a threat in Nadine.

“Unless you’re Cora.” She looks down, culpable but repentant.

“Why?” Abigail asks, smile falling from her lips. “What happened to Cora?”

“Well, this was before she bit off her tongue. It must have been…” Nadine squints off into the distance, remembering time and images. “Two years ago in the spring. I’d just gotten here, and Cora had been here a while, dealing with some things. She’d just had a baby when I met her, and she still had that glow, you know?” Abigail smiles at Nadine’s smile. Looking at it makes Abigail realize that the woman’s straightforward manner of speaking only makes her seem hotheaded and excitable where she’s actually gentle and kind.

“Where’s the baby now?”

“Her mom has him, sweet little baby. Cora and her mom, they’re really close—or they used to be, back then. Their relationship’s been sort of strained since she had the baby. The man Cora got mixed up with, the baby’s father, he’s bad.” Nadine says with significance. Abigail doesn’t have to ask what he did to believe her. “He would come and see Cora back when they would still let her out of here to go visit her folks, and one day he just snatched her up out of the blue, and police had to go looking for them. They couldn’t find them for months until some park rangers in Connecticut found them in Devil’s Den.”

“What were they doing?”

“Scary shit in the woods.” Nadine shivers. “They were holed up in some motel when they weren’t out there. Cora told me he gave their baby to the devil.”

“What else did Cora say?” Abigail lingers on the image in her mind of a younger, talkative Cora sharing the tale of her exploits in the wild with a madman, leaves tangled in her flowing blonde hair and dirt smudging her face. She imagines how she would have looked out there with a baby bump toward the end of her stomach, showing through filthy clothes. She pictures the skin underneath flaked with the drying blood from whatever animals the man she was with found to sacrifice—that’s only if he sacrificed animals.

She wonders at how much of this story is true but decides she doesn’t need to ask. The most important thing is what Cora said about it.

“She said she couldn’t stand the sight of him after he took her. A lot of times she wanted to cut the baby out and not have it because of what he was like and how she is, in here.” Nadine nods her head at the high walls lining the garden. Abigail swallows. “But she was far enough along in the pregnancy when they found her that she said it felt too much like murder to go through with it, so she had it and let her mom take care of it.”

“Where’s the father now?”

“In prison for kidnapping and a few other things. Cora’s mom tried to make her say that he raped her, too, but she wouldn’t testify that he had or that he hadn’t.” Nadine bites her lip, deep in thought. “Once she told me they came across a horse deep in the woods off the trail, and he killed it and put its blood all over himself and all over Cora. They got together like that sometimes, bloody and dirty under the moon, usually when it was full, she said.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know what all was wrong with him, but I think he might have been schizophrenic. She told me he would talk sometimes, and no one would be there. And he’d get mad and hit her when she asked who he was talking to, but he never told her who it was.” Abigail’s stomach turns at the thought of anyone hitting sweet lovely Cora. “He told her they were married, and she believed it for a long time; thought everything was her doing.”

“Why did she bite off her tongue?” Nadine’s jaw sets.

“Her mother said she didn’t want to be near this place anymore in case he ever got out of prison and tried to come looking for Cora or the baby.”

“She moved him away.” Abigail’s heart sinks.

“She didn’t even tell Cora where they were going; only that he’d never find them. Cora, when she heard, she—Well, you know.” Abigail nods.

“Her mom comes in the summer with Noah, and they visit, but it’s not the same now that Cora’s…Her mom treats her different now; like she’s crazy or…” Nadine takes a deep breath and shakes her head. Abigail notes the tears in her eyes. “It isn’t fair what happened to her. She never asked for any of it; just happened to catch some evil man’s eye and kept it long enough for him to ruin her life.” Abigail bites her lip and blinks around the stinging in her eyes.

“She has an amazing voice, too.” Nadine smiles fondly at the memory. “She used to sing in Italian; beautiful, like nothing you’ve ever heard before. She would get all the words in there and make you think she was a native speaker. She knew a few German songs, too, and one in French.”

“I wish I’d known her before everything that happened to her.” Abigail says softly, wistfully.

“People say everything happens for a reason. Maybe some of us have to walk through hell to figure out who we really are and see what’s important.” Nadine says. Her eyes are glazed over as she follows the sounds of passing traffic just beyond the high wall. Abigail looks that way, too. She thinks if an oasis is just a hallucination of the thing one wants or needs most, hers is just a bustling, hectic world outside of this gilded cage. She thinks it could also be Dr. Lecter’s home or his office, even; the nameless woods she walks through on days when she can’t fight the urge to jump over the wall.

“They told you to leave Cora alone, didn’t they?” Abigail nods yes. “They told me that, too, after she bit off her tongue.” She looks away nervously and stands to her feet. Her hand is much gentler now when she pats Abigail on the arm. “They want their medicine to be the thing that cures her, and they’re setting themselves up to fail.”

“What would cure her?” Abigail asks as Nadine walks away. The tall, bulky woman stops in her tracks and twirls on her heels. She looks like she could be an athlete, all muscle and finely tuned movements: a track runner or a figure skater. Abigail wonders what she does to stay in shape in here. “I don’t know if anything would, to be honest.” Nadine sounds more

than sad when she says this, though there is a joking smile on her face; a very well-fortified self-defense mechanism against pain and against sorrow. “I don’t know if anything can cure any of us.”

“What about family?” Abigail stands so Nadine won’t turn and leave her without the answers she needs. She wobbles a little on her feet.

“If you’ve got it and they don’t forget about you?” Nadine thinks about it. “And if they’re not the reason you’re here in the first place?” Abigail laughs in spite of herself. She and Nadine are both here because of things their fathers did to them. She finally remembers hearing her story a few weeks ago and could kick herself for forgetting it: a handsy father too comfortable sharing a bed when his wife was out. Abigail shudders and covers it up by rubbing at her arms. She actually is pretty cold now that she thinks about it.

“If you make a new family.” Abigail revises. Nadine studies her.

“That scruffy guy in the fishing jacket and his boyfriend.” Abigail’s lip quivers with the laugh she’s fighting.

“Yeah, them.” Nadine thinks about it.

“They know who you are, and they stick around anyway. I’d say, hold on tight—but not too tight. People tend to run when you do that. I guess I speak from experience.” She smiles, a little chagrined. The hint of embarrassment makes her look a whole foot shorter and much more petite, but she shrugs it off in a second, and she’s an Amazon again. Abigail wouldn’t have her short and dainty. It’s not who she is.

Nadine twirls off again without saying goodbye. She just shouts, over her shoulder, “See you in group, Abby.” Abigail can’t even be upset about being called Abby. It sounds right when Nadine says it.

She sits back down, having no drive to do anything else. She thinks about Cora and about Noah, and she thinks about a brilliant red bird she’s never seen up close before. She thinks about Will as a scruffy guy in a fishing jacket and about Dr. Lecter as his boyfriend. She thinks about being in a family with them, about creating something strong and indefatigable between them.

She thinks about Nadine calling Dr. Lecter Will’s boyfriend again, and she laughs, loudly, until tears burst out the corners of her eyes. She doesn’t really know what makes it so funny or if anything about it is inherently funny. It’s just that she feels light thinking about them, lighter than she’s been able to feel in a long time. She feels safe and anchored, and she feels like what they have for her is something like love in its earliest stages.

She stands and walks inside and goes up to her room to lie down and warm herself back up. She pretends she’s asleep when the nurses come calling, but she’s only waiting for Will and Dr. Lecter to arrive and take her away from here, if only for just a little while.

Chapter End Notes

"The Scarlet Ibis," by James Hurst
http://schools.roundrockisd.org/westwood/academ/depts/dpteng/L-Coker/VirtualEnglish/Englsih%20I/English%20Ia/scarlet_ibis.htm

--
As always, chapter titles and song lyrics inspired by the mystical beings John Densmore, Robby Krieger, Ray Manzarek, and Jim Morrison, otherwise known as The Doors.

And also, bluesyturtle.tumblr.com

I Looked At You

Chapter Summary

The Murder Family has dinner.

Chapter Notes

I looked at you/You looked at me/I smiled at you/You smiled at me/And we're on our way/No, we can't turn back/Yeah, we're on our way/And we can't turn back

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The strawberries have been macerated with the sugar and pomegranate juice when Hannibal finishes adding the crumbled meringue nests into the whipped cream. Hannibal separates the strawberries into a bowl to be refrigerated and goes the same way with the cream. They won't be paired until Hannibal serves them for dessert.

Will bustles about setting various spices and odds and ends Hannibal used back in their respective places. He learned where they all went watching Hannibal take them down. He checks his watch.

"We've gotta go get Abigail." He ducks into the hall to grab his jacket from the rack in the foyer. Hannibal's lips purse at the old green material when he re-enters the kitchen to shrug it on. Hannibal is wearing an apron, plain white with pressed edges. It manages not to look like a feminine article of clothing on him. Will desperately wants to switch it out for something pink and flamboyant with *Kiss the Cook* printed across the front. He just wants to see if he could get Hannibal to wear it; wants to see if it would look as good on him as the plain white one does.

"The quiche has ten minutes in the oven." Will's arms drop to the sides, deflated. His eyes flicker from Hannibal's tie to the oven and then back. "She will still be there if we leave ten minutes later." Hannibal says good-naturedly, reaching behind himself to untie the apron. He folds it quickly and tucks it into a drawer.

Hannibal has been in the kitchen since he left to go see Abigail the first time. He left him standing in the backyard grilling radicchio while the dough for the quiche chilled in the freezer. Since he had been out, Hannibal had tossed the red chicory into a large salad bowl with pepper and parmesan cheese, set the quiche in the oven, and prepared deep green cucumbers with artful swirls of lox and cream cheese. Will wants to steal one thick slice of the adorned cucumber, but he's sure Hannibal wouldn't let him get away with it.

“She just seemed really…” Will sits down at the kitchen island without bothering to take off his jacket. He looks around and remembers their confrontation. He shivers.

“How did she seem, Will?” Hannibal slides in beside him. Will sighs.

“Ah, sad, actually.” He draws invisible lines on the counter top with his finger. He studies them closely as if an algorithm will reveal itself if he watches carefully enough. He can’t look away from them because Hannibal’s eyes are on his face.

“What did she say to you?”

“She said she wished she didn’t have to go back.” Saying it makes him feel miserable all over again.

“Someday she won’t have to.” Hannibal twists his fingers into Will’s hair, kneads a little at the nape of his neck. Will leans into the touch unthinkingly and then catches himself tilting his body in Hannibal’s direction. He straightens up and clears his throat. Hannibal looks displeased, but his fingers continue to play with his hair.

“How can you know that?” Will doesn’t ask to challenge Hannibal; he asks because he needs to know the answer if there is one. He needs to know how they free their daughter and complete their family.

“She has us, and we will not leave her there.” Hannibal says easily, leaning into Will to brush the hair away from his eyes with his other hand. The fingers on his right slip down to Will’s shoulder and rub circles through his jacket into his muscle. Hannibal kisses him on the cheek softly, and Will closes his eyes. “We cannot let her stay there, and so we will not. She will be with us soon, Will.”

“She believes in us.” Will breathes, astonished because it’s the truth. Hannibal’s forehead presses against his when he looks up. His eyes are cast down at Will’s lips, so all Will can see are his eyelids. He angles his head and takes the kiss.

Hannibal licks at Will’s bottom lip and holds him by the back of his neck. For a split second they’re out in the yard under the full moon, and Will is in Hannibal’s lap. Hannibal is speaking gentle words into Will’s ear. His lips are dragging against his flesh: *“We are equals, Will.”*

Will opens his eyes when Hannibal bites him, gently, on the underside of his jaw.

“Where did you go?” Hannibal muses, soothing the bite with a slow lick of his tongue.

“The first night we…” Will touches Hannibal’s arm. He doesn’t know how to phrase it: when they had sex, when they fornicated, indulged in coitus?

“When we first made love.” Heat spikes up Will’s back. He can tell it migrates to his neck because of the way Hannibal tracks it with his eyes. He wonders if it’s a cannibal thing, his infatuation with Will’s blood; whether it’s drawn to the surface via laceration, hematoma, or blush, it always steals Hannibal’s attention. Will wonders if Hannibal even knows he does it.

“What part?” Will chokes on his spit and coughs. Hannibal’s eyes are positively shining, though his mouth gives away no signs of mirth.

Will has learned to look beyond what Hannibal shows with his face in order to see his emotions. Most often, that results in his staring into Hannibal’s eyes as Hannibal stares right back at him only seemingly unaffected. Sometimes there is a shine there like there is today. Hannibal is enjoying Will’s discomfort; he finds Will’s modesty amusing. Well, two can play at that game.

“I was in your lap.” He says with only a small token of his unease contributing to his very real embarrassment. “You were getting rough with me because I bit your tongue.” He fights his smile but can’t fight the rush of warmth that darts up beneath his jaw, probably staining his neck bright red all around the pulse point. He can feel it pooled there, waiting for just enough of a push to climb the expanse of the mandible bone and color his cheeks with the fevered blood. He watches Hannibal’s eyes track the spectacle and looks away, biting his lip hard in between his teeth but not hard enough to break the skin; hard enough to leave the bitten skin slick and ruby red as he lets it fall free.

“It reminded me of when I bit you in Williamsport and made you bleed. I thought about how I’d taken communion from you.” Hannibal’s breath turns slightly ragged, just enough so that Will can hear his quick inhale and exhale. Hannibal leans in abruptly, fisting his fingers in Will’s hair so his head tips back and bares his burning neck for Hannibal’s lips, teeth, and tongue to ravage.

“You know what you’re doing, don’t you?” Hannibal growls into Will’s Adam’s apple. Will holds onto Hannibal’s shoulders, tipping his head back a ways farther and shoots his eyes to the timer on the oven. *Perfect.*

“The quiche is ready.” Will notes, swallowing around his fluttering heart where it’s shot up into his throat and stifled his airway. Hannibal leaves wet kisses down the column of Will’s neck and unzips the jacket as he goes. He bunches Will’s collar in his fingers and moves it to the side, exposing Will’s collarbone. He bites down and sucks, and if Hannibal weren’t holding Will firmly around his waist, Will knows he would have fallen off the stool.

Will writhes beneath Hannibal’s mouth, trying to crush Hannibal’s body against his but to no avail. Hannibal finally releases him; a panting, shaking mess with a hickey flowering on his skin. Will can just make out the plum-colored rosebud outlined with two perfect rows of teeth in the bottom edge of his vision when he looks down.

“I expect we will finish this later, Will.” Hannibal’s hair is mussed on one side, and his cheeks are pinked, but he still looks ready to take the stage or to take on the FBI or anyone else. He stands; all refined elegance and a straight beautiful back. Will numbly zips up his jacket, though it feels a hundred and twelve degrees inside. Hannibal quickly removes the quiche from the oven and sets it on a wire rack on the counter to cool. He passes Will briskly to take up his coat from the foyer. He steps back into the kitchen. “Coming, Will?”

Hannibal drives to Port Haven in his car with Will bouncing his heels in the passenger seat. It’s seven thirty when they pick Abigail up. She smiles wide and goes with them to the car after Hannibal signs his name beside hers on the visitor sheet.

Abigail and Hannibal speak to each other over the quiet hum of the radio. Will thinks the music might be Mahler. The reedy opening calls and answers of the sections fill the car like warmth in a cold room, like a cool breeze on a hot day; both nourishing and replenishing at once. The oboes sing to the cellos, they sing to the horns in turn. They are flustered suddenly, all lashing out with their various cries.

He listens to the urgent crescendo of the lower strings singing with the brass and relaxes into his seat. Hannibal converses with Abigail over the resonating tremolo of violins as the music crashes divinely to its crest and dissolves into a sweeter, softer melody. He listens to the faint pizzicato of the double bass and the cello. He closes his eyes, and he imagines the music in terms of colors and actions and visions.

The smooth clarinet is Abigail walking down a flower-hemmed trail with Hannibal at her arm, and she's much older and unspeakably beautiful. Her dress is white, and somewhere in the fantasy is a man brave enough to take her from Hannibal, passionate enough to take her from Will. The clashes of sound and the intertwining melodies thread together in the sky, taking on the forms of lightning bugs of every flashing color.

Hannibal is speaking to Abigail as the music swirls light and mystical around them. She answers in the affirmative and tugs on his hand. They continue walking together down the trail, and the clouds roll in above, marring the sky the way a dye twists into water and changes the clear liquid to match it.

The song sinks to a trudging tempo, and the sky flickers into black above them, but they smile still and press on. The ominous notes of the harp are drops of rain falling all around them, and the scene is almost baroque the colors are so vivid and the edges so defined. Hannibal's suit is an inky black; he wears a brilliant purple dahlia pinned to his lapel. Abigail has a red rose tucked behind her ear and many smaller flowers braided into her hair. The rain doesn't seem to touch them as it falls.

The melody picks up a sweet frolicking pace, and Abigail skips with it through the gentle rain. Hannibal grins as he follows her down the trail, and he is every bit as beautiful as Abigail is. They are a princess and a king running side by side.

The music lifts and sings with fever, with a renewed purpose. There is fire in the sky, more like fireworks this time than actual fire. It bursts in raw explosions of color and heat, and Will can feel the sparks graze his cheeks. Abigail comes to a sudden but graceful halt. The flowers in her hair tremble with the inertia and discontinued motion. Will realizes they are stopped in front of him. Hannibal is out of breath but smiling, and Abigail is laughing as she puts his hand in Will's. Her scar is gone from her neck.

The music sighs into silence, a precise decrescendo that leaves them standing in a perfect soundless landscape of green grass, an opaque canvas of sky mapped out above them. He can see the lines that connect the constellations, and they are the celestial maps Fontaine Preston carved into the bodies of her victims, all of the bodies except Casson's.

Hannibal looks up and frowns at the lines, finding them ill-fitting for this paradise they have found together. The violins are his hands reaching up into the heavens as easily as if he were reaching for a deep red apple in a tree. The stars change their shapes at the touch of

Hannibal's purposeful fingers. His hands are the stag's antlers after all, and they have the power to save life, to give it, and to take it away. They have the power to create new planetary bodies and leave the outdated galaxies destroyed and obsolete. He paints the sky with one hand and holds Will's with the other. Abigail turns and paints her own pictures into the sky.

The sky rumbles with thunder, with the clash of the timpani and the double bass. Hannibal is leaning down and kissing Abigail's hair. He's whispering to her, and there's no way Will should be able to hear it, but he does. He says, *"I'm going to kiss your father now."*

And he does, and Abigail grins from behind her hand. The last thing Will sees before he closes his eyes and kisses Hannibal back are the tears in her eyes. They're happy; they're all happy.

"I adore you, Will." Hannibal murmurs into his lips; the violins tremble, and the percussive booms shake the earth they're standing on. Will isn't entirely sure it's not just his beating heart causing the ground to quake. "I adore you." He says again.

"Will."

Hannibal is touching is face when he opens his eyes. The piccolo and the flute are conversing over a French horn. Will turns in his seat, and Abigail is nowhere to be seen. He panics momentarily, checking to see that they are, in fact, parked in Hannibal's driveway.

"She is inside." Hannibal says, prophetic mind reader that he is. Will sighs, grateful that he didn't imagine that part.

"Did I fall asleep?"

"Hard to say; you were talking to yourself." The radio is still playing, though the car has been switched off. Hannibal left it on for Will; knew what he had used it for. The clarinets and the flutes are whispering their highest octaves to each other, hushing each other into a uniform adagio. Will smiles when he hears the viola's deep ruddy song speak into the airy music. Hannibal smiles, too, and he brushes his thumb across Will's forehead. He counts four plucked notes of the harp through the final sustained note of either a clarinet or a flute. The movement ends, and it leaves a cleansing air behind it like the aftermath of a vortex touching off.

Hannibal switches off the radio, and they wait. Will touches Hannibal's jaw with searching fingers. He feels the grooves along the bone and watches how his motions tug at the man's chin and cause his plump bottom lip to drop open just so.

"What did I say?"

"You said, I do." Will ignores the heat that claims his neck even as Hannibal dives down to chase it with his lips. "What were you dreaming of?" Will laughs because there's no reason he shouldn't tell Hannibal, none at all.

“Abigail gave you to me.” Hannibal presses his forehead into the nook between Will’s jaw and his neck, and he breathes. His smile is small, but Will feels it tucked up against his skin.

“Does that make me your bride?” Will grins at the absurdity. Hannibal is no one’s bride.

“I thought she was the bride. She was dressed that way, in white.” He tilts his head to one side to give Hannibal room to come back up. He leaves chaste pecks all along Will’s neck and at his ear and in his hair. Hannibal has pulled Will across the seat at some point, and they are wrapped up in each other, cozy in a warm embrace. “But then she brought us together, and we were…we were whole.” Will sighs, threading his fingers into Hannibal’s hair. He’s dizzy with this moment, a millimeter short of melting.

“We are whole, Will.” That about does it. Will connects their mouths and kisses Hannibal, takes his breath into his lungs, tastes him on his tongue. Hannibal moans against his lips even as he separates them. Will knows they must stop; knows Abigail is waiting for them in the house.

Will sighs and opens his door. The rush of cool air does a little bit to clear his head. Hannibal gets out of the car and goes with Will up the walk around the front of the house. He opens the door for Will and follows him inside.

Abigail’s jacket is hanging in the foyer when Will and Hannibal deposit theirs on the rack. They find her in the kitchen sitting on a stool at the island. She looks up at them and hides her smile well. She physically looks like Will, and she resembles Hannibal in her controlled but revealing demeanor. Will can’t believe how stunning and unassumingly perfect it is that they’ve found each other. As if sensing that Will’s mind is taking another sentimental detour, Hannibal cordially asks him to take the plates and the silverware to the dining room. Will does this and takes his time setting the table. Before he can wander back into the kitchen Hannibal has emerged with three plates, two on one arm and one held by the edge.

Will doesn’t move from where he is; he doesn’t want to do anything to throw Hannibal off-balance. Abigail comes carrying a bottle of red wine and three glasses.

“Is she drinking?”

“I made lemonade while you were out.” Hannibal smirks at Will as he sets the plates down.

“It’s pink and not from dye.” Abigail is obviously very impressed.

“Strawberries?” Will pulls out a chair for Abigail, and she sits.

“Cranberries.” Hannibal calls from the kitchen. Will takes his own seat and pours wine for Hannibal and for himself. Hannibal returns with a glass pitcher of almost red lemonade. He fills Abigail’s glass. The bright pink catches the light and looks luminous in the glass like a gem or a living thing, like a bright red rose tucked behind Abigail’s ear or like a deep red apple Hannibal plucks from a tree.

Hannibal sets the pitcher down and stands straight at the head of the table. As is his custom, he announces the names of the items constituting their dinner: “Quiche Lorraine with sides of

grilled radicchio salad and lox and cream cheese stuffed cucumbers." Abigail smiles and waits until Hannibal sits to take up her fork.

"What's in Quiche Lorraine?" Will asks, good mood allowing him to forget that he's probably about to eat human flesh, though he has to ask. It smells pretty good. Hannibal's eyes find him over his first forkful.

"Pork fat, traditionally." Hannibal takes a bite, and Will's mouth dries. He takes a pull of wine to counteract the effect. It smells strong and earthy almost like tobacco; the taste is all blackberries and licorice. It goes with the creamy chive of the quiche. He rolls the morsel around in his mouth when faced with it.

It's nothing he hasn't eaten before, he reasons. It tastes wonderful on his tongue. The meat gives when he chews it, releases a juicy gush of rich flavors: pepper, a bite of salt, a sharp meaty contrast with the gruyere. It tastes like bacon. He swallows, and it isn't difficult getting it to go down. He takes another bite, and Hannibal is watching him, and his eyes are giving away every last thought and emotion inside him. Will sees hunger, joy, delight, and surprised relief. Will drinks his wine and tries a cucumber slice. It's cool and crisp, and the cream heaped on top of it softens the refreshing taste just enough to bring it into the same realm of palate as the quiche.

Abigail sips her pink lemonade and tries the salad. The grilled radicchio stands out bright violet against her skin.

"How did you meet?" Abigail asks with the innocent severity of a child. She takes a bite of the quiche and looks expectantly from Will to Hannibal. Her eyes are bright, curious.

"I was asked to consult for your father's case." Hannibal says when Will's reply is to just fog up the rim of his glass with his breath. Abigail falters a little bit; she drops her eyes, nods, and takes another bite of the quiche. "Will was not immediately taken with me, if you can imagine." Will chokes on his wine, and a silent laugh tumbles from Abigail's open smile.

"You were wearing an ugly suit, in my defense." Hannibal smiles around the cucumber slice he daintily bites into. Only the piece he tears with his teeth comes away. The rest of it remains pristine between his two fingers.

"How long before you started dating?" Abigail drinks her lemonade and eats more of the quiche.

"He got me drunk in a fancy restaurant when we were still in Williamsport." Will mutters, flushing red from all the questions. "Before the seizure." Will adds at Abigail's curious expression. She drops her eyes first.

"I did not tell Rudolphus to refill your glass twice before you had any food in your stomach." Hannibal sips primly at his wine, and Will resists the urge to hang his head. He huffs a laugh suddenly and scrubs his hand over his face, mortified to the point of apathy.

"Did you see the women watching us in the parking lot?" Abigail's eye brows shoot up to her hairline. "Oh, it's not like that. We were just sitting in the car, talking." He enunciates the last

word.

“Across the street from the restaurant.” Hannibal nods, unfazed. “Quite rude to stare like that.” He shakes his head.

“They were harmless.” Will chides as he takes a drink of his wine. “Oh, who’s driving back to Port Haven?” He notes Abigail’s crestfallen expression on the other side of the table but doesn’t look. He can’t.

“I will drive.” Hannibal tips his head. Will notices Hannibal is still left with three quarters of his glass. Will’s is almost drained. “You really must learn to pace yourself with your wine, Will.” Hannibal smiles at Will’s frown. He gives Abigail a conspiratorial look. She looks like she’s enjoying herself, even if the imminent return to Port Haven obviously distresses her more than she will say in words.

“I’m a scotch man.” Will shrugs around the humor aimed at him. “What is this anyway?” He swishes the deep red wine in the glass.

“Vérité La Joie, 2002.”

“Bordeaux?” Will guesses, eye brows furrowed. His stomach tosses happily at the sight of Hannibal’s gracious smile that tells him he’s guessed correctly. “Truth and joy?” He puzzles over the French. He knows veritas is the Latin for truth, so he figures he might not be far off.

“Truth and joy, Will.” Hannibal’s smile lingers as he raises his glass, and Will has to snap himself out of it before he realizes Hannibal is toasting.

“Truth and joy.” He clinks their glasses together too roughly, causing the wine to slosh in the glass. Hannibal’s smile only widens. It touches his eyes, and Will almost drops his glass. Hannibal raises his glass to Abigail as well, catching her off-guard. Will looks and sees her just looking away from him. Her smile is small when she clinks glasses with Hannibal, and giving into the manners of their host, Will clinks glasses with her, too, before filling it again with more of the Bordeaux.

It might be the wine or the food settling in his belly, but he feels warm and contented. He watches Hannibal cradle his last cucumber slice between his fork and knife and set it on Abigail’s plate where all of hers have disappeared. She grins, and all right, Will kind of gets Hannibal’s fascination with his blushing. She looks so sweet and young and frightfully innocent with the deep pink staining the apples of her cheeks. Happiness is a rare shroud to see her in. She’s beautiful with it, like his imagined version of her in white under a stormy sky, lightning illuminating her dark hair.

Will finishes the quiche and the salad first. His cucumber slices he saves for last. They really are delicious; they’re creamy, and they take away all the other flavors warring for dominance on his taste buds. Abigail is drinking the last of her lemonade when Hannibal stands and clears their plates from the table. She follows him into the kitchen with the emptied glasses, waiting for Will to nod before she takes his. Will stands and analyzes the bare table. The bottle of wine and the pitcher half-filled of dark pink lemonade are the only things left, so he takes them and joins Hannibal and Abigail in the kitchen.

“Here, I can wash.” Will sets the bottle and pitcher on the counter. Hannibal dries his hands and kisses Will on the mouth before disappearing with the wine around the hallway. Abigail doesn’t say anything; just continues to dry the dishes as he washes them. Hannibal bustles back into the kitchen and removes the milky white pudding, the bowl of strawberries, a pomegranate, and two kiwis from the fridge. He shelves the pitcher of lemonade and takes to the kiwis with a short sharp paring knife.

Will watches him peel and slice the kiwi over his shoulder. The plate he’s scrubbing slips out of his hands. Hannibal looks up at Will, his thumb still guiding the arch of the knife through the soft green meat of the tiny fruit. The juice sluices down Hannibal’s palm, and Will turns back to focus his attention on the dishes. There are only a few left. In his mind he can see Hannibal holding a larger knife and flaying the skin of a man dying or newly dead. He can see the translucent green juice turn red and pulpy as it flows copiously over Hannibal’s hands.

He helps Abigail dry the wine glasses, adamantly not looking as Hannibal licks the green juice off the fleshy part of his thumb. They set the wine glasses back in the cupboards and turn to find three glasses with the fruit-laden Eton Mess on the counter top before Hannibal. The bottom of each glass is lined around the sides with the kiwi and the ripened strawberries.

He cuts the pomegranate in half and taps each half over the cutting board still slick with the green juice of the kiwis. It’s the same bamboo cutting board from last time. Will remembers Hannibal said it was stronger than steel.

Abigail sits across from Hannibal, and Will sits beside her. It really is something special watching Hannibal cook. He scoops up the seeds and distributes them between the three glasses of Eton Mess. He leaves the halved pomegranate on the counter and piles the cutting board and the paring knife into the bowl with strawberries and slides that into the larger bowl with the vanilla and whipped cream concoction. He sets them in the sink and returns with cleaned hands and three spoons. He passes Will and Abigail the sparkling glasses of freshly made Eton Mess and sits at the corner of the island nearest to Abigail.

“That was really impressive.” Abigail says as she brings the first spoonful to her mouth. Will and Hannibal both watch. They are, each of them, emotionally invested in her reaction. She smiles and takes another bite. Will dives into his, and the sweet tang of kiwi bursts around the sweet strawberry and the sharp eruptions of pomegranate seeds as he bites into them with his teeth. The cream is mellow beneath the citrus and berry tastes of the fruit.

“I had the privilege of a large kitchen and no shortage of subjects to practice on.” Will’s eyes dart up to Hannibal’s. Hannibal smiles and takes a bite of the cream. There are several pomegranate seeds speckling the white substance.

“Your Uncle Robertus’ kitchen?” Will recalls the name from their previous conversation of Hannibal’s parents; of his orphan in common with Abigail. Hannibal nods his head once. *“I had a very traumatic childhood.”*

Will swallows another bite, too soon to appreciate the sweet medley of flavors. He drops his eyes.

“You lived with your uncle?” Abigail digs with her spoon to reach one of the buried kiwis.

“Until I was sixteen.”

“Did he teach you how to cook?”

“His chef taught me how to cook.” Hannibal smiles, and Abigail returns it with one of her own. “They were very well off, he and his wife.” Hannibal’s eyes appear to cloud over before he blinks the haze of the memory away and takes another bite of the Eton Mess.

“What was her name?”

“Murasaki Shikibu, a Japanese noblewoman. She was elegant and very beautiful.” Hannibal pauses before bringing his eyes to Abigail’s. “It has been some time since we last spoke. We did not part as friends.” Will watches Abigail’s face, watches her mouth drop open just a little bit. She looks down back into her glass and spoons a strawberry and a few pomegranate seeds along with the remainders of the cream.

They finish the dessert, and Abigail takes their glasses to the sink. Hannibal goes with her. He dries the washed dishes and shows Abigail how to polish bamboo with mineral oil. Will hears him tell her about how bamboo is stronger than steel and smiles to himself. Hannibal and Abigail loiter around the counter for a minute after he sets the cutting board back where it hangs above the sink. She turns her head a little, and her eyes flick to Will’s. She nods once at Hannibal. He says something, and Abigail breaks into a wide grin. She throws her arms around Hannibal, and he laughs as he hugs her back.

Will burns inside wanting to know what was said, but he waits. He waits and finds himself smiling watching the two of them as they hold onto each other. Abigail runs over when Hannibal releases her and kisses Will on the cheek.

She spins out of the room before Will can ask. To Hannibal, he says: “I’m not complaining, but…?”

“I told her of our wishes to adopt her when the time is right.” Hannibal nears, resting his palms on the backs of Will’s hands to effectively trap him, though Will could break free if he wanted to. He looks up at Hannibal, and he does not want to, even knowing what he knows.

“When the time is right.” Will repeats. Hannibal kisses him.

“When the time is right, Will.”

“Alana said we shouldn’t do that.” Will says without heat. It’s more of a tease the way it falls out of his mouth, all clumsy excitement and adrenaline and panic and winded anticipation.

“There will come a day when Abigail is freed,” Hannibal murmurs. “And when that day arrives, we may do with that freedom what we like.”

“I wouldn’t be free. Just on a longer leash.”

“Which would you prefer, really?”

Will smiles and kisses Hannibal back, lightheaded and happy; deliriously happy. He goes with Hannibal to get his jacket, and they reconvene with Abigail in the car. Schubert is playing this time when the radio switches on; a familiar fugue on the piano. Will eases back and listens to it but doesn't let it claim him this time. He remembers the dream he had last time and puts it to the music.

He sees Hannibal running with Abigail's hand in his, the wind pulling at his hair, his open smile as he brings Will in for a kiss. It plays like a silent movie. The fugue carries no intense crescendos or dramatic crashes of percussion. The imagined memory is peaceful, devoid of any real feeling but for a warm, thrumming peace right at the center of him, which, he realizes with a very real smile on his face, is residual. Hannibal radiates calm even in his dreams. He is a soothing anchor and a fire producing warmth and a light by which to see in the filthy darkness of a vicious world.

Hannibal can shut out the rest of the world because he is one of those filthy, vicious things that crawl out of the darkness. He opens his eyes halfway to Port Haven. The inside of the car is dark, warm, and lowly lit by the passing streetlights that flutter by. Will watches Hannibal.

He has a fire of his own burning inside of him. Hannibal matched him before; maybe someday they would match naturally and Hannibal wouldn't have to bend to meet him.

He had said they were the same; he had said Will was capable of more, of becoming anything he wished to become.

Hannibal's eyes flick to Will's briefly before finding the road again. Will reaches out to hold Hannibal's knee. Hannibal smiles, and Will smiles, too. He leans his forehead against the frosted window and catches sight of Abigail in the side mirror. Her eyes are down, her face is turned to the left, and there is a smile on her face. Hannibal finds his hand with his own and laces their fingers together between their seats, and Abigail is watching. She turns to look out the window, and her smile has become a grin.

Will closes his eyes, and the song on the radio changes. He thinks about fire, how it can't ever be tamed in its entirety; how the smallest spark can destroy a forest. Fire built the world, and it can tear it down, too.

He squeezes Hannibal's hand and listens to the music. Hannibal squeezes back.

Chapter End Notes

I strayed from the recipes, I'm so sorry! But they sounded better combined, so. If you don't like it, eat me. Oh, wait.

Grilled Radicchio Salad
http://www.simplyrecipes.com/recipes/grilled_radicchio_salad/

Lox and Cream Cheese Stuffed Cucumbers
http://www.foodnetwork.com/recipes/sandra-lee/lox-and-cream-cheese-stuffed-cucumbers-recipe/index.html

Quiche Lorraine
http://www.simplyrecipes.com/recipes/quiche_lorraine/

Vérité La Joie, 2002
http://www.wine.com/v6/Verite-La-Joie-2002/wine/85300/detail.aspx

Old Fashioned Pink Lemonade
http://www.simplyrecipes.com/recipes/old_fashioned_pink_lemonade/

Eton Mess
http://www.foodnetwork.com/recipes/nigella-lawson/eton-mess-recipe/index.html

Autumn Eton Mess w/ Pomegranate and Kiwi
http://www.asplashofvanilla.com/2012/04/22/autumn-eton-mess-with-pomegranate-and-kiwi-fruit/

Will's dream is based on Mahler's Symphony No. 9

You Make Me Real

Chapter Summary

Hanny and Will do sexy things and briefly discuss the logistics of their relationship.

Chapter Notes

I really want you, really do/Really need ya baby, God knows I do/'Cause I'm not real enough without you/Oh, what can I do?/You make me real/You make me feel like lovers feel/You make me throw away mistaken misery/Make me free, love, make me free

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The curfew at Port Haven is ten sharp. Abigail is returned at nine thirty. Will stays in the car when Hannibal escorts her inside. She hugs him again at the bottom of the stairs and thanks him; she tells him she would like to have dinner again sometime.

What Alana said about surrogacy becoming a crutch for Abigail's trauma, naturally, holds true. Like Will grew intimately attached to Hannibal via touch and support, Abigail would grow more and more dependent on Hannibal and Will both for the care and love they provide her with. If it is not already, their presence in her life will blossom into a mandatory condition of her happiness and outward tells of sanity. Hannibal plans to make sure that this is what happens.

"You will see us soon," He says, brushing her hair with one hand. "Goodnight, Abigail."

She smiles when she breaks out of his hold. She says goodnight and turns on her heels to jog up the stairs. He returns to the car and once more finds Will dozing. The music cuts out briefly as the engine turns over, and he stirs but doesn't wake up. Hannibal looks upon the sleeping face of Will Graham, traces the stubble bristling down along his jaw with the tip of one finger. The last Will shaved was a few days ago.

He backs the car out of the space and pulls out of the parking lot into traffic. Will sleeps peacefully to Vivaldi's Winter from the Four Seasons.

Will had dreamed to the music before. He had dreamed of taking Hannibal for a husband; a peculiar thought to say the least. It may not be something Will genuinely wants, though he had not shied away from Hannibal when asked. He had just spoken the thoughts on that beautiful mind of his; had been of free of fear or worry that Hannibal would misunderstand

him or pull away. It held some deeper meaning, beyond just the institution and oath of marriage. Abigail had been there; she had been the one to give Hannibal away.

Their family, undoubtedly, was the focus of the dream. Will had asked before they left to retrieve Abigail how they would bring her home to them if they could. His and Hannibal's literal union symbolized the creation, or the fruition, perhaps, of their bonds to each other and to Abigail.

Will wants commitment and roots, too. He still intends to stay.

The song changes to an Italian piece. It's familiar, and Hannibal recognizes the singer's voice. He smiles at the lyrics and thinks about Will; he thinks about how irrevocably the man has stitched himself into Hannibal's very sense of being. Since the moment they first made eye contact in Jack Crawford's office, Will had snared him. Without knowing it and without realizing the gravity of what he'd done, Will had taken Hannibal captive with his tormented capacity for empathy and held him with the bear trap of his mind. The music plays on, and Hannibal translates in his mind:

"Si lo so che non c'è luce in una stanza quando manca il sole, se non ci sei tu con me, con me."

Yes, I know there is no light in a room where the sun is absent, if you are not with me, with me.

Hannibal hadn't been with someone like Will in many years, not since his first years in college: a blonde from the women's lacrosse team, so full of life and vigor that Hannibal couldn't help but ignore the ill-fitting, boyish attire and the dirty fingernails. She could be crass, purposely withholding, and rude in the simplest respects. She could be and often was, much like Will can be and often is. Those that frequented the same social circles as he were unable to grasp the concept that the most amazing beauty of all comes from the darkest, filthiest places; the old adage about diamonds in the rough. Lucinda had been quartz; Will is a diamond.

"Quando sei lontana sogno all'orizzonte e mancan le parole."

When you are far away, I dream on the horizon and words fail.

"E io sì lo so che sei con me."

And yes, I know that you are with me.

His schoolmates had little understanding of his tastes or of the ill-fitting, dirty past he'd come from. No one knew what his interests were or how to explain the things he allowed them to see. His origins posed an even deeper mystery that they could never comprehend. No one really knows now, save Will, but even he only knows the least explicit details that he can get away with barely skimming over. He has not asked Hannibal any new questions since their encounter on the stairs. Hannibal suspects he can't.

If anyone can understand why Hannibal kills and why he enjoys it, it is Will. Hannibal knows Will can understand if he just makes himself look. He has not so far, but Hannibal's hold over him only grows stronger each night they fall into bed together. There will be more of the same tonight.

Hannibal will let him have his ignorance for now. It will only be bliss for a short while longer. Will will need further sustenance soon. He will need the full truth. He will need all that Hannibal is. He will want all that Hannibal is. There will be nothing he can do to change his mind when that time comes; no way for him to go back if there is one left for him now.

"Tu, mia luna, tu sei qui con me; mio sole, tu sei qui con me."

You, my moon, are here with me; my sun, you are here with me.

It is a beautiful song; honest and bittersweet in its honesty. It is a song about death and about the ultimate companionship found and solidified within its pact. It is a song about Will and Hannibal.

He finds as he listens that it is not for them because they are ghosts or because they are fated to die together, though Hannibal doubts their deaths will be separate events or widely spaced apart if they are separate. It is for them because of the devotion attached to the words. It is for them because of Will's efforts to accept Hannibal even as he struggles most nights to let himself fall asleep in Hannibal's bed. It will become easier; Will will acclimate himself to this life with Hannibal, and they will not part. They will go together. From now on, they will always go together.

He has never felt this way about anyone before, not really. He's not certain whether he feels it now. Will Graham is an anomaly; the easiest victim Hannibal could ever take and the hardest one from which to part, after everything.

"Con te partirò. Paesi che non ho mai veduto e vissuto con te, adesso si li vivrò."

I'll go with you. Places I never saw and shared with you, now you shall experience them.

Hannibal is not a sentimental person. He is not particularly passionate in matters of the heart except when prodded for exploratory inquiry; ambushing Will with random pecks or tongue kisses and soft touches of their hands. Spontaneous sex, too, is something Hannibal has taken to initiating with Will seamlessly, and frequently. Will would call it spontaneous anyway; Hannibal always walks into a room and calculates the odds for every possible outcome between him and another person. With Will, he usually considers sex and spur-of-the-moment brawls with the possibility to end up bloodier than the sex they typically have.

"Con te partirò su navi per mari che, io lo so—no, no, non esistono più."

I'll go with you on ships across seas which, I know—no, no, exist no longer.

He hasn't had to fight with Will yet. He's come to expect it less and less as time presses on, though Will finds other ways to surprise him: sex on the stairway, for instance.

Hannibal turns off the freeway and weaves through a few residential side streets until his home looms up around the bend of the street. Will wakes with the music; it pulls the sleep out of him like a conductor pulling a crescendo from the strings.

“Con te io li rivivrò. Con te partirò.”

With you I shall experience them again. I’ll go with you.

Will sits up in his seat and scrubs at his eyes, confused. He scrunches up his eye brows and looks at Hannibal as he’s turning the key in the ignition to kill the engine.

“Io con te.”

I with you.

The final note stretches between them, suspended like decomposing hands protruding from beneath the fertilized earth; like human corpses transformed into fleshy, gory seraphim. Will looks at the radio, and Hannibal wonders if he understood the words. He wonders if he might have felt what the song meant even if he had no previous knowledge of the lyrics or of their English translation from the Italian.

Will switches off the radio at the final plucked notes of the song when the low silence of static that comes with a commercial descends over the car. They sit, and Hannibal watches Will for what he will do. They have never been especially tame in close quarters. Hannibal can feel the heat emanating off of Will; it has its own rhythm. Will knows they’re alone now, and he knows Hannibal wants him. There’s only so much he can do to keep his hands to himself.

Hannibal doesn’t attempt to ignore the charge in the air. He unbuckles his seat belt and leans over to take Will’s lips with his. Ever receptive, ever disarmingly impatient, Will sighs into Hannibal’s mouth and kisses him with a well-masked fervor. His lips move against Hannibal’s, and he’s licking along Hannibal’s tongue. Already he is breathing erratically. He bites Hannibal’s lip, and Hannibal takes this as a sign to move things along. He leans back and brushes his lips along Will’s hairline as he says, “Tell me again how you took communion, Will.”

Will moans and scrambles to unbuckle his seat belt and crawl into Hannibal’s lap. He has a penchant for putting himself there, it seems. Hannibal will not seek to correct this behavior. He quite likes the way Will tilts his upper body slightly to one side rather than hunching his back to hold Hannibal’s eyes. He can do that now. Will has no secrets left to hide from Hannibal, and Hannibal never breaches his mind by accident anymore. He holds his eyes steady even as he takes Hannibal’s bottom lip into his mouth and sucks. He releases him and smirks, pressing his forehead against Hannibal’s temple.

“In that hotel room in Williamsport,” Will begins as his hips press into Hannibal’s navel to allow their groins to touch. An ember sparks in Hannibal’s gut. “You grabbed me like this.” Will guides Hannibal’s hands down from his back to sit at his hips. Hannibal squeezes as he is expected, and Will’s eyes flutter shut. A moan rides the wisp of his sigh. He clutches at Hannibal’s fingers for a moment before letting go in favor of Hannibal’s shoulders.

“You’re the reason that feels so good.” Will whispers. Hannibal understands what he means. Will was under his influence when Hannibal touched him that way, and the memory of what it felt like remained with him. The sensation it carries is exclusively Hannibal's; it can be produced only with Hannibal's hands. The spark flares up possessively inside of Hannibal, and he pulls Will’s body against his so their fronts grind together. Will’s hand weaves into Hannibal’s hair and holds tightly along the roots. He yanks the tie loose and unbuttons Hannibal’s vest one-handed, showing more acute dexterity than he has in the past.

“Tell me how it feels.” Hannibal murmurs against Will’s pulse. He takes a deep breath in and then another. Will shivers; he knows Hannibal is scenting him.

“It feels like you’re…” Will’s fingers pull tightly at Hannibal’s hair, forcing his head to tip back. Will groans and kisses him. His mouth opened against Hannibal’s, he says, “Like you’re claiming me.” He rolls his hips against Hannibal’s. A moan shoots passed Hannibal’s lips, and he smothers himself with Will’s body, pulling him in close so there is no space dividing them anywhere.

“And when you bit me.” Hannibal breathes, taking Will’s earlobe between his teeth.

“Like I’d—” Will’s breath stutters in his throat. Hannibal removes his tongue from his ear. “Like we were…it was part of the dance, the courtship. It was my part.” Will groans beneath Hannibal’s testing hand. His own hands shoot down to Hannibal’s zipper, and Hannibal stops him, not without reluctance.

“No, don’t. We need to…”

“When we are inside, Will.” Will’s eyes ping back and forth between Hannibal’s and then he fumbles with the car door handle, slightly less controlled this time around, though his hands never shake anymore when they are together.

Reconsidering, Will turns his attention back to Hannibal. He twists to one side and recovers the keys from the ignition; Will knows which one is the house key. He wrenches the door open and stumbles out into the cool night and waits for Hannibal to slink out of the car. Hannibal walks beside Will as he picks through the keys for the car remote to lock the car. He haphazardly finds the house key and jabs it into the doorknob while Hannibal waits patiently behind him. Will drags him inside and throws him against the wall before the door slams shut, catching Hannibal quite off his guard.

He pushes back against Will, careful not to push too hard as it may be misconstrued as violence. Will senses that apparently because he pins Hannibal to the wall by his shoulders. Something resembling a growl tumbles from his lips when he recombines his lips with Hannibal’s, and Hannibal takes the line given to him. He grips Will’s arms tightly and shoves back at him until they’re bouncing back and forth between the walls of the foyer with each landing punctuated by a groan or a grunt.

“Do you know what you feel like?” Will gasps after a particularly rough collision between his back and the wall. Hannibal pants into his ear and tastes the salty skin on his tongue.

“Tell me.”

“The earth.” Will rips his vest open and Hannibal’s shirt goes the same way. Will lost his jacket somewhere by the front door. “The wind and the rain.” Will laps at Hannibal’s chest, finding his nipple and swirling his tongue around the hardened nub before shoving Hannibal into the opposite wall. Hannibal grunts; the sound overlaps Will’s groan. “Fire.” He smiles against Hannibal’s neck. “Pure sensation.” Hannibal strips Will of his shirt and works at his belt.

“Pure in the way that only animals can be pure, Will?” Will laughs and pushes Hannibal’s pants down so they puddle around Hannibal’s ankles. He kicks them off and sends Will’s pants down with them. They drag each other into the den, and Hannibal topples Will over onto the couch. He spreads his body across Will’s and breathes through his nose when Will’s tentative hands pull Hannibal’s boxers down his thighs. Will’s touch is soft on Hannibal’s skin, still uncertain of the proper way to handle him when they are like this. He wriggles out of his own boxers, and they touch everywhere. Will moans and drops his head back into the cushion of the couch.

Hannibal takes Will’s cock in hand and tugs twice before Will make a disgruntled noise and grabs at Hannibal, too. They pump each other fluidly for a few strokes before Hannibal can slick the tips of his first two fingers with a deliberate flick across Will’s tip where the Cowper’s fluid has begun to trickle out. He presses there, and Will’s hips jerk beneath him, starved for more pressure. Hannibal removes his hand and treks lower in between Will’s legs. Will doesn’t complain even as his body deflates slightly with frustration. He knows what Hannibal means to do.

His body quivers around Hannibal’s two fingers when he inserts them both, driving halfway inside of him before stopping. Will cries out and pinches his eyes shut. He turns his face into the cushion, knocking his glasses crooked on his face. He goes to take them off when Hannibal eases in the rest of the way so his fingers are buried in Will up to the very start of his metacarpals.

Will’s fingers clench spasmodically and send his glasses clattering to the carpet. He gasps and rakes his fingers across Hannibal’s scalp, digging in deeply with his nails. Hannibal bites Will’s lip and worries the plump flesh with his teeth so Will has no way to muffle his moans. Hannibal removes his fingers to lubricate his third but Will pushes him back with both hands on Hannibal’s clavicle.

“No, I don’t need it.” Hannibal sits upright at the behest of Will’s warm hands on his skin. Will leaps up from the couch to cross to a desk and rifles through it. Hannibal is about to tell him he does not keep sexual implements hidden throughout the house in secret caches but is pleasantly shocked into silence when Will produces a brand new tube of lubricant Hannibal did not purchase. He smirks up at Will as he bends down to drizzle the clear viscous stuff onto Hannibal’s cock.

“Ambitious, Will Graham.”

“Advantageous, Dr. Lecter.” Hannibal slides his hands onto Will’s hips and pulls him forward so he steps one knee on the outside of Hannibal’s leg.

Will changes his mind before stepping his left knee on the other side of Hannibal's body. He places his right hand on Hannibal's shoulder and twists to the left so he can face away from Hannibal as he straddles him.

It makes no difference. Hannibal runs the palms of his hands up Will's sides, quite favoring the smooth expanse of skin he has to explore when they have sex like this. Will eases down onto Hannibal, and Hannibal busies himself taking Will's pulse with the slightest pressure of his lips against the man's neck. Moisture gathers along Hannibal's upper lip where it touches the sweat-beaded skin. He counts twenty five beats in ten seconds, multiplies by six for a hundred and fifty beats to fill the minute. Will comes to sit fully in Hannibal's lap. His body is a pulsing current of tightly wound energy. Hannibal wraps one arm around Will's stomach to pull him flush against his chest.

Will shivers in Hannibal's arms, moans his name, and lets his head fall back on Hannibal's shoulder. Hannibal tightens his hold on Will but doesn't begin to move yet. He will wait for him to signal that he is ready. Will spreads his legs a little wider around Hannibal's and arches his back so he lifts off just a ways, enough for friction to drag between their bodies and enough to shock a loud moan out of Will.

He is especially sensitive tonight. Hannibal wonders if the temporary burden of parenthood had caused him stress and that's what has rendered him so intoxicatingly virile. Hannibal can smell it on him, harsh and abrupt like the smell of pine after a heavy rain; a statement of his masculinity and of his ability to protect and provide, his ability to procreate.

Hannibal tongues at the nape of Will's neck where the sweat has soaked his hair and emphasized the wonderful bouquet of heat and fevered sweetness brought on by his encephalitis. He blows his breath over the hot skin, and Will's body stiffens. He begins to move above Hannibal. He trails one hand behind him to hold Hannibal at his flank and reaches overhead with his other to hold Hannibal by the back of his head as his body undulates over Hannibal's. Hannibal bends his neck to leave a kiss at the corner of Will's mouth, and Will turns to accept a more fittingly placed one on his bottom lip. Hannibal unwinds his arm from about Will's waist and fits his hand back on the sharp jut of his iliac crest. He lifts Will up and then brings him down, smoothly and only raising his hips to meet him at the end when Will has already taken the full length of him.

Will groans and scratches the nape of Hannibal's neck as his fingers fist in his hair. He rolls his hips and lifts off, and when he drops heavily back into Hannibal, Hannibal holds him tight and lets all courtesy and caution fall away as he begins to move beneath Will. His body trembles with fervid energy and tension. He moves with Hannibal and gasps around each intake of air.

Will is a shaking, gasping mess on top of Hannibal. He would have him this way all the time if it were not counterproductive to the drudgery of daily life. Will's hair flops into his eyes, curled across his forehead like small perfect hooks. Hannibal presses his right hand into Will's pelvis and swipes his left across Will's hair before tipping his head back and to the left so it drops over his shoulder again. He sucks at Will's neck, bites his clavicle, and groans when Will slams down onto him. Will's nails bite into his side where he's still holding on for

dear life. Hannibal groans again, and Will moans in response. He likes to hear Hannibal when they do this.

“Did you like to think that I would claim you this way, Will?” Hannibal breathes Will’s name into his ear. Will whimpers and nods his head frantically, not trusting himself to speak. “Tell me it’s what you want.” Hannibal demands, forcing Will’s body down onto his again. Will makes a strangled noise in between a moan and a yelp. “Tell me, Will.”

“It’s what I want.” His words rush out between gritted teeth. He gasps.

“Is it really?”

“Hannibal!” He smiles against Will’s neck. His own breathing is labored; his own skin is flushed with Will’s fever, with their collective fire.

Hannibal shifts his hips against Will’s in preparation to hit his prostate on the next down stroke. Will’s body convulses; the muscles tighten up inside of him. Hannibal can feel them roiling in his back and through his thighs. He twists his fingers into Will’s hair and bites down on the soft flesh of his throat. Will sinks down repeatedly onto Hannibal, impaling his prostate on Hannibal’s cock each time. His hand leaves Hannibal’s side to work his own neglected cock, but Hannibal steels his fingers around Will’s wrist and forces the hand to clutch uselessly at the sofa cushion.

He bites Will again, nearer to the hollow of his throat this time. Will screams, and the vocal cords vibrate against Hannibal’s teeth. He comes with a garbled moan on top of Hannibal, and Hannibal follows shortly after just as soon as the ripples of Will’s orgasm come to a stuttering halt.

Their bodies hum together. Hannibal can feel the magnitude of Will’s sated pleasure ebb out of him in waves. Will’s body slackens on top of Hannibal’s. He groans as he drops his arm from behind Hannibal’s head.

“Sadist.” Hannibal smiles.

“Masochist.” He kisses Will’s shoulder, flicking his eyes to the side so he can watch the bruises blossom all down his neck where Hannibal’s teeth have marked him again and again. Will sighs.

“I must be.”

“I think so, yes.”

“This is killing me, you know.”

“It could be, but it has not.”

“You have an awful sense of humor.” Hannibal’s smile widens against Will’s warm skin.

“Fitting then that you would be the first to appreciate it.” Will turns his head slightly to look at Hannibal. His eyes are downcast, and his cheeks and neck are still ruddy with blood.

Hannibal presses his lips to Will's trapezius muscle, and their eyes lock. Hannibal eases Will up and off of him and waits a moment before turning him in his lap. Will looks down at their mess and makes a vaguely disgusted face.

"And cue the clever line about not letting things go to waste next time." Will mutters, having finally caught his breath. Hannibal brushes Will's hair back out of his eyes.

"I prefer to watch you swallow, though penetrative sex does not allow for that." Will looks away. His embarrassment is palpable, though his body is still too hot to develop a concentrated blush underneath any one patch of skin. Hannibal touches it all anyway with his hands, his tongue, his lips, his teeth. Will doesn't fidget in his hold, and Hannibal swells a little with pride and contentment.

He watches Will, distracted with some internal contemplation. Hannibal wonders at what he could be thinking about. He nudges Will's temple with his forehead, catches the scent of him on his jaw: dewy and warm like grass on a summer morning before it's been rended by human hands.

Everything about Will is ripe and rejuvenating. He has the means to be an army and a haven on his own, but he refuses to let himself rise or be acknowledged for all that he is. Hannibal meant it when he said he could be more; he could be much, much more than what he limits himself to. Hannibal's arms snake around Will's waist, a band and a shield in the guise of flesh and bone.

"Will."

He was never one to ignore his curiosity. Will's eyes find his, alert but sleepy at the edges. He bites his lip, anticipating a hard question. He knows Hannibal well, though not well enough.

"Why have you not told Jack Crawford who I am?"

Hannibal's arms tighten around Will when he tries to get down from his lap. Will does not struggle against him; he knows Hannibal will not let up without receiving his answer. He is too tired in his state to fight. He is always too tired after they've been together like this, when he takes Hannibal from behind. Will has not said as much, but Hannibal can feel the difference in his muscles after he's been fucked on his back counter to when he's gone on his stomach. He allows himself to feel everything more fully, through a lens more sharply attuned to every prickle of hair against his body and every pinch of his flesh beneath Hannibal's teeth and nails.

He loses himself to the animal nature of the act and lets himself be stranded amongst his cells and his skin; he lets Hannibal fuck him as if they are both primeval beasts with a simple biological need to survive. It's heady. Hannibal likes to look into Will's eyes when they are together and see the conflicting emotions dilapidate into nothing but hunger, desire, and frantic need, but he loves the feeling of Will unraveling and giving into his body, reduced to a simple creature enthralled by his passion.

Will's eyes are blank, the emotion from them rubbed raw with too much pleasure and too much excitement. Will blinks and traces along the median nerve in Hannibal's forearm with

one, then two fingers. He leans down and leaves a wet, lazy kiss at the bend in his arm where the radial and ulnar arteries intersect.

“You don’t know?” Hannibal thinks he might.

“I would like to hear your answer.” Will nips at the brachialis anticus just above Hannibal’s elbow. Will’s breath changes, not quite a sigh but something heavy like one.

“I…” Hannibal hears Will’s gulp. His fingers clutch at Hannibal’s ribs and at his biceps brachii.

“Yes, Will?” Will ducks his head so his face is hidden against Hannibal’s neck. Will’s voice is soft, almost a squeak.

“I adore you.”

Hannibal would know if he had felt this way before, and he never has. He holds Will closer to him, calming him with a hand in his hair and another at his back. Hot tears burst apart on Hannibal’s chest. Will doesn’t tremble or make a sound, to his credit. He is silent, and Hannibal permits him to experience the moment as such. He runs his hands down Will’s back and notes that his heartbeat is irregular again. Hannibal can feel it pounding unevenly from the dorsum of his ribcage. There is no way to tell without looking at him whether Will is enraged or afraid or fraught with panic. Hannibal wants to know, but he has resolved not to take Will’s ill begotten refuge from him before he has readily relinquished it. It will always be this way with them; Hannibal will not falter now so early on in the game.

“Why?” Will asks finally. Hannibal strokes his hair and waits for him to elaborate. “Why did you pick me?”

“You know why I picked you.”

“Give me another answer.” Hannibal’s hand stills on the crown of Will’s head. He pulls back, and his face is stained with the saline lacrimation. He draws the thumb of his right hand across one of the streaks and drops his left to the base of Will’s neck just above the thoracic segment of his spinal cord. He can feel Will lean into the touch, though he appears not to move.

“I had no choice.” Hannibal says slowly. Will’s eyes widen fractionally, and his lips part with one ragged breath in.

“What?” Hannibal licks his lips.

“When we met, Will, when you first looked into my eyes, I knew what lay at rest within you. The fire we share in, I could feel it even then.” Will’s eyes falter and trip down Hannibal’s throat. He swallows hard and touches his fingers to the manubrium atop Hannibal’s sternum. “How could I have turned away from you?” Will’s nostrils flare. He bites down hard on his lip, breaking the skin. He reaches up with his hand reflexively to staunch the blood flow, but Hannibal stops his wrist from following through with the command. Will stares at him, and his lip bleeds down onto his chin. A lone drop plummets to his chest before Hannibal dips

down to clean it with his tongue. He comes up for the rest and some smears across the apple of his cheek.

Will dabs at the sheen of his blood on Hannibal's skin with his thumb, and Hannibal presses their lips together before he's had a chance to pull at the blood straight from its source. It continues to flow between them, and Will's hand slips into Hannibal's hair. Their mouths bloom against each other, and their tongues wrestle leisurely in their mouths, creating a new, comfortable heat between them.

It is Will who breaks the kiss. His mouth is stained red. Hannibal imagines he must look similar. He licks at the puncture on Will's bottom lip, and Will's breath is warm and steady where it tumbles down Hannibal's chin.

"Don't change the subject." Will murmurs when Hannibal abandons his efforts to catch the last drops of Will's blood on his tongue.

"Not my intention." Hannibal smiles and runs his hands up Will's back. He squeezes at the deltoid muscles, and Will closes his eyes, though he doesn't want to. His mouth falls open as if to object, but no words come. His fingers find Hannibal's triceps as if to force Hannibal's hands off, but he only latches on tightly. "We must set up a time to do this on a weekly basis."

"Do you mean for barebacking in your living room or for routine exsanguination?" Will's voice is a throaty grumble, used up from shouting his pleasure and quieted by the easing of his aching muscles.

"For the purposes of a massage, Will." Hannibal says with a smile. Will's lips tug at the corners. It pleases him when his sarcasm bounces off Hannibal like light deflected off a shined surface. "Although…" Will clambers off of Hannibal's lap and stands on shaky legs.

"Before you even go there," Will hobbles toward the heaps of shed clothing scattered across the floor. He is five feet and eleven inches of pale skin and uncoordinated limbs, and Hannibal loves to look at him. "We need to talk about better equipping ourselves to handle your random urges to mark up the house."

"Is that what you think we have been doing?" Will wipes his discarded shirt across his stomach and then carefully folds the edges to manage the cooled semen. Hannibal watches him attempt to put on his pants and give up halfway through with an amused expression that causes Will to frown when he sees it. Hannibal stands from the couch, sparing a glance to the couch to check for stains. There are a few that will come out with the proper cleaning rituals.

He gathers their clothes up and walks naked through the house to deposit them in the washing machine. Will hangs back in the hall, not ashamed of his body but wary of the windows. Hannibal smiles and takes solace from the fact that the oak tree obscures the view from behind the house. The placement of each window allows nothing for the neighboring houses either. They were more exposed in the driveway than they are in Hannibal's kitchen.

He rejoins Will at the foot of the stairs and climbs up to the second story with Will at his heels. Their nudity is neither cloying nor distracting. Will has a beautiful body, of course, but

Hannibal has explored it in excess today. He can appreciate without the aid of his eyes. Looking would set Will's nerves on fire, and the encephalitis has him burning up enough as it is. He has yet to decide whether he will allow for Will to know the diagnosis when he finally seeks medical attention for his worsening condition. Maybe if Will comes to embrace his nature by then, Hannibal might give him healing in the utmost form. It would bind Will to him that much more.

Hannibal takes down two towels from the hallway closet and hands one to Will who still has modesty within him to turn the tips of his ears red. The tiny smile on his lips is a delectable palate cleanser. Hannibal leans in and tastes it on his tongue, sweet and uninhibited and frightened by simple intimacy.

They set off to shower together. They scrub at their own bodies, though their hands stray and rove across the slippery surfaces of each other's soapy limbs, shoulders, chests, stomachs. Hannibal doesn't track the progression with his eyes so much as he feels one shared moment meld and contort into the next before Will is on his knees and sliding his hand around Hannibal's cock and rolling his testicles in the other. He guides Hannibal into his mouth, and Hannibal's fingers thread into Will's hair in the same instant that his head falls back against the shower wall.

Will is neither exceptional nor poor when it comes to delivering oral sex. That it is Will's clever mouth and sharp tongue fellating him is what makes it incredible. Will does nothing to pin Hannibal's hips to the wall so he will not buck into his mouth. Hannibal has not deduced yet whether that is because Will wants him to abuse his mouth or because Will trusts Hannibal enough to control himself, but Hannibal does his part. He stays very still and only tightens his grip in Will's hair when something feels especially good but never to force himself deeper into Will's mouth.

Will looks up at Hannibal when he begins straining inside his mouth, and Hannibal remembers his words. He fights the surprise rush of his orgasm to watch Will's eyes where they are shining mischievously. His eyelids fall closed to the image of Will's lips stretched around him with blue irises sparking like twin plasma flames.

Hannibal opens his eyes in time to see Will swallow twice before pulling back and licking Hannibal clean. He had held it in his mouth so Hannibal could watch him consume it. Hannibal takes time to regulate his breathing as Will gets to his feet and kisses Hannibal's cheek with a faint smile on his face. He looks sated, too, as if Hannibal's orgasm felt every bit as wonderful to him as it had to Hannibal. He doesn't ask, but he wonders if this was the case.

"You weren't kidding."

"I tend not to." Hannibal winds his arm around Will's waist, less a security precaution for Will than a selfish need on Hannibal's part fulfilled. He licks a forgotten drop of semen from Will's chin, tastes himself on the balmy skin.

He can smell himself there, too, all over Will. It was never about marking the house.

“I’m learning that about you.” Will mumbles. Hannibal’s hand slips down to grasp Will’s cock. He smiles when it plumps readily in his hands.

He smiles wider when Will gasps and says, “You don’t have to.”

“Of course not, Will.” He pumps him in his hand, and Will sighs. He presses his forehead into Hannibal’s clavicle where his breath helpfully paints a picture of how close he is to peaking since Hannibal can’t see around the back of his head. Will senses this and angles his face into Hannibal’s neck to mouth along the superior thyroid vein. His breath hitches, and Hannibal works him faster with his hand.

Will is on the cusp of his climax when Hannibal sinks to his knees and captures the vivid burgundy organ in his mouth. Will cries out and braces one hand on Hannibal’s shoulder, the other he plants firmly on the wall. He comes in Hannibal’s mouth, and Hannibal lets him watch as he swallows just as Will let him watch. Will moans and drops to his knees with fatigue and with spent momentum. Hannibal holds him in his arms, and Will whispers, “I adore you.”

Hannibal smiles and murmurs into his hair, “Yes, I know.”

Will sighs, and his body is a warm gust of air that fills Hannibal’s lungs and surrounds him; it is the durable, all-encompassing clay of the earth that molded everything in existence out of carbon and recycled atoms; it is a baptism in water. Will is fire, and Hannibal has never felt this way before.

“I adore you.” He says back, and he hears Will laugh in joy and disbelief.

Chapter End Notes

Con te Partirò
http://lyricstranslate.com/en/Con-te-partiro-duet-Sarah-Brightman-Time-say-goodbye.html#GKoT8EwuG60cQ7FL.99

^ I prefer Andrea Bocelli on his own from A Night in Tuscany, but I used these lyrics, so cheers.
To Italian speakers, I apologize if the translations are rough. I made intuitive leaps where possible. The internet, you know. -,-

The description of the smell of encephalitis comes from the show, as you all are probably aware.

Also, I see tidbits everywhere in this fandom (lol tidbits) of Hannibal telling or teaching Will not to waste the baby gravy. I’m sure I’ve read it in multiple places, but the only one that comes to mind is loghain’s *The Nature of Inviting.* So I tip my hat to him/her specifically, but it’s a nod to anyone else who’s used a similar line. I built my home in

this fandom, and I don’t want to cheat anyone by not crediting where credit is due. I just wanted to put my own little spin on it. <3

And I got so damned frustrated trying to spell "palate" right. I hope you are all happy.

Peace Frog

Chapter Summary

Jack asks Will to verify one of the Chesapeake Ripper's kills.

Chapter Notes

Blood in the streets runs a river of sadness/Blood in the streets it's up to my thigh/Yeah, the river runs red down the legs of a city/The women are crying red rivers of weepin'

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Simon fusses a little when Will pours water down his muddy back. This is the fifth dog bath today. Sometime in the night it had rained, and he'd woken up to eight filthy dogs and a wrecked patch of dried earth outside behind the trees. He'd taken care of the smaller dogs. After Simon there is still Winston, Fenris, and Penelope.

The Bernese mountain dog has been with Will's pack of strays for something like a year now, but he is still a skittish, frightful animal. No one's ever posted signs for him, and Will thinks it's probably for the best. Simon snapped at him when he found him limping and bone thin last fall. He couldn't be integrated with the other dogs for weeks, and feeding him was no small feat. He's a good dog, though. There's no such thing as an inherently bad dog so much as there are just an abundance of poor dog owners and lousier trainers. Whatever happened to Simon before Will found him, he's grown out of his constant state of trepidation and become a moderately sociable dog; man's best friend and all that.

Well, if the alternative to a dog is a homicidal cannibal equipped with the skills and experience to run a gourmet kitchen and to minister to the mentally unstable. Will knows he's made his choice, but he feels no shortage of guilt and dread for what he's allowing to go on right under his nose. He can stop it; he's the one to make it all stop, but he can't. He can't, and Hannibal knows. Will's window of opportunity to take action against him passed. Will let it slip right by, and Hannibal watched him do it. He'd only sweetened the prospects of their relationship since then, waving family and freedom in his face like a carrot on a string.

He knows Will is caught, and yet he'd asked why he hadn't told Jack. It's almost as if he expects it will only be a matter of time; as if he suspects Will hasn't only because he hasn't *yet.*

He'd asked why, and Will had told him the truth. He'd told him and sucked his dick in the shower and swallowed just because Hannibal told him he liked to watch Will when he did it.

He had kissed him on the cheek afterwards like they were sweethearts or lovers or some other saccharine atrocity neither of them had any right to be or share with another person. He let Hannibal touch him and take him in his mouth and return the favor, and every moment of it was unfettered bliss and perfection; the first steps of many on their journey into perdition. They'll go together, like that Italian singer on the radio said.

"I'll go with you. I with you."

"I adore you."

Will wishes he hadn't said it, but Hannibal had to have known already. Will is sure he knew. After all, Hannibal said it before Will ever had, before Will ever could. Damn him.

There are mats in Simon's fur. He'll have to brush him later once all the dogs are bathed.

Simon shakes the water from his bath all over Will and jumps out of the metal washtub. He calls Simon back from where he's chasing his tail in the yard to rub him down with a towel and then blow dry his wet fur. The noise it makes is an unwelcome one, and Simon barks his discomfort. Will makes it short and heads back up to the porch.

He sighs, dumps the water in the tub, and calls Winston over. Winston's better about being bathed. He always proved himself to be a gentle, patient animal; gentle enough to let Will take him home and patient enough to go with Will into the darkness when they were still so new to each other. It wouldn't have been frightening for Winston; it only seemed like a big deal to Will because he hadn't wanted to end up so far from home, shivering and confused.

What did Alana say? A dog keeps a promise a person can't?

He's halfway through scrubbing caked earth off the Akbash Dog he's called Fenris when his phone rings. He wipes his soapy hand on his pants and digs through his pocket. Jack is calling him.

He breathes in through his nose and out through his mouth three times and answers.

"Jack."

"Will, how soon can you get to Nottingham?" Nottingham is just a ways out from Baltimore.

"It's an hour's drive. I might need two." He shoulders the phone and rinses the suds from Fenris' sides and around the scruff of his neck. Will brushes the bubbles that have sprouted on top of the dog's head away, and Fenris presses back into Will's hand eagerly. Will swallows his feeling of déjà vu and scratches Fenris behind the ears. "What do you have?"

"I think it's him."

Will's mouth goes dry. He scrambles to pick up his phone when he drops it and it clatters down the porch steps.

"Will, are you there?" Jack repeats his name. "Will."

“Sorry, I’m washing the dogs.” He whistles, and Fenris hops out of the tub.

“I didn’t realize I was keeping you.” Jack says only a little bit presumptuously.

“You’re not. There’s only one left.” He eyes Fenris as he prances about in the yard shaking water out of his coat and getting Winston and Harvey, the beagle, wet. Fenris will have to be brushed later to accommodate for his shedding, after Will gets back from looking at Hannibal’s crime scene.

He slips on the water puddled at the bottom step of the porch and takes a towel down to get at Fenris’ sopping wet fur when he runs from him. Baths put him in a more playful mood than usual. Will trips over the uneven ground.

“I won’t be long.”

“We’re waiting on you, Will.” Jack disconnects the call, and Will swears. He tucks the phone back in his pocket and pats Fenris down once he catches him. He pats his thigh, and Penelope comes running for her turn in the tub. Will has to pet Fenris again when he comes to nose at his leg before he can get to Penelope up on the porch. Of course he wants attention now that Will doesn’t have to chase him anymore.

He hurriedly washes Penelope’s brown fur and towels her down. There’s nausea pooling in the pit of his stomach; nausea and anxiety and a profound fear that he can’t even begin to acknowledge. His hands are clumsy with the towel, hard to control for how much they shake. Thirty minutes after Jack hung up on him, the dogs are washed and dried, and Will is covered in mud and dog hair. He plods carefully into the house to hop in the shower and change clothes. He wants to take his time and prolong the inevitable as long as he can, but his legs and his arms won’t listen to him. He’s too nervous to be intentional in his movements. The only thing that slows him down is that he bumps into every corner and drops everything he touches.

The dogs have wandered back inside and gathered in his bedroom when he emerges from the shower. Harvey is huddled up against Penelope on his bed, and she looks less than thrilled but too comfortable to do anything about it. Will gets dressed. He trips twice on his pant legs and buttons his shirt incorrectly.

He runs out of the house with his keys and has to turn back around when he realizes he’s made it halfway to the car in his bare feet. He toes off some of the dried mud adhered to his soles and trudges back into the house. He wipes them down with the towel from his shower and pulls on socks and shoes before trying again. He grabs his wallet off the kitchen counter and locks the door on his way out.

His hands are still trembling when he makes it to the car. He pokes at the handle with the key and scratches the paint but eventually manages to unlock the door.

He falls into the seat, bumping his head on the roof of the car before he pulls the door shut. He sits in a frenzied silence and realizes after a moment that he’s hyperventilating, if only slightly. He fumbles the key into the ignition and switches on the radio, all thumbs. He finds a classical station and immediately changes it. The absence of words, for once, is not

something that will calm him. The next station he finds is a radio DJ discussing the previous song Will just missed; an old Queen track. Will listens hard at the words and times his breaths to the woman's deep soothing voice.

She trails off with a laugh that Will knows is meant to be sweet and uplifting but only feels ominous and oppressive deep down in his gut. He rests his head on the steering wheel, and there's a short silence before the next song picks up.

"Tasteless."

"Do you have trouble with taste?"

"My thoughts are often not tasty."

"Nor mine."

Will bites his lip and concentrates on the lilting opening guitar riff.

"We passed upon the stair. We spoke of was and when…"

"No effective barriers"

"I build forts."

"Although I wasn't there,"

"Associations come quickly."

"So do forts."

"He said I was his friend, which came as some surprise. I spoke into his eyes, I thought you died alone, a long, long time ago."

"Not fond of eye contact, are you?"

"Oh, no, not me. I never lost control."

"Eyes are distracting."

"You're face to face with the man who sold the world."

"You see too much; you don't see enough."

Will swallows and backs out of the long driveway onto the dirt road. He drives and turns up the radio until he feels like he can't see around the barrier of noise and amplified lyrics shaking the windows of his car.

"Who knows? Not me. We never lost control."

The song pulsates around him with static currents of the walking bass line and heavy drumbeats that rattle the windows. Will focuses on the connectivity between notes, the

singular morphemes that compose each word, the disapproving looks he gets when he passes through an intersection to shoot for the freeway. He doesn't hear the protests of the people yelling at him to slow down as he turns sharply onto the ramp and weaves into traffic, already pushing seventy five.

He can't think. He will get to the crime scene, and Jack will ask him to think, and so he must think as little as possible until he gets there. Everything is about to become horribly real.

The hour whittles down. He pulls over to check the text Jack sent him with better directions and reluctantly follows them once he makes it to Nottingham. When he pulls onto Philadelphia road, he switches off the radio, and his thoughts come back to him in swells. He remembers the quiche, he remembers the dinner party, he remembers his first breakfast with Hannibal: protein scramble.

"It's delicious."

Hannibal had watched him so closely. His eyes fell to Will's mouth to track the movement in his jaw, and Will had thought then that he was merely waiting for Will to speak. He had thought maybe Hannibal was a proud chef, and he took joy from watching others enjoy his food.

"Finish your breakfast, Will."

The second part was true.

Zeller waves him down from the side of the road almost immediately after he passes the White Marsh Volunteer Fire Company on Ebenezer. He slams on his brakes, surprising Zeller, though he doesn't say anything about it when Will pulls the car over onto the shoulder and parks. Zeller walks in stride with him and explains the reason behind the long walk up.

"Some kids contaminated the crime scene, thinking it was a Halloween decoration. The next neighbor that way called an ambulance. It's taking up the whole road, and Jack doesn't want to create gridlock on top of that."

"Who's the victim?"

"Yusuf Vartanian, 38. Manager at a Farmer's Market in Rosedale not ten minutes from here."

The panic flares up. His hands shake and sweat with it. Zeller keeps walking and doesn't notice the terror drumming up inside of Will.

They climb the hill together. It's pretty steep, and the gravel's been knocked loose from years of wear and weather. His steps are too rough in a few places, causing his feet to slide out from under him. Zeller catches his arm the second time he does it and tells Will to take it easy. His voice holds his trademark chummy humor; it even crinkles the edges of his mouth in a slight reassuring smile. He only looks worried in his eyes. Will can tell he's surprised that Will looks and actually holds his stare. His surprise makes them both uncomfortable.

He watches the sky instead of trying to smooth over the awkward moment; it's cloudy but blue like in Williamsport when he went looking for Hannibal. He keeps his eyes there until they come to the ambulance. Two teenagers, or younger maybe, are sitting side by side with blankets draped across their bony shoulders. The brunet looks up at Will when they approach, expecting more questions maybe. The freckled redhead at his side just stares, bright blue eyes glazed and war-worn. There's a smudge of dirt on his forehead that he hasn't bothered to clean. There's a chance he doesn't feel it or care that it's there.

They round the giant square vehicle, and time slows. Will's breathing comes in deep rushes of sound like waves lapping at the shoreline. He sees red in the topmost curve of his vision and swallows the lump in his throat. It's fear and it's hysteria and it's denial, and everything beneath his skin is cold like ice. Zeller brings his arm up in an effective roadblock that strikes Will firmly across his chest cavity when he walks into it.

Zeller hadn't meant to touch him, but he doesn't drop his arm until he has Will's attention.

"Are you all right?" Will thinks about telling him no.

"I'm fine." Will steps around him, and Zeller lets him go. He mutters something under his breath before falling back in step beside Will, and they don't stop until they are in line with the blood soaked into the dirt beside the road.

There's an abandoned Ford Taurus across the street with the doors unlocked and the windows rolled down. Will stares at it and takes the latex gloves Zeller hands him.

"Body's up that way." Zeller nods with his head. Will doesn't have to stand on his toes to see it poised over the cornstalks in the form of a gruesome scarecrow. He takes a deep breath and pops an aspirin. Zeller watches him do this and hovers for a moment as if to say something but then changes his mind. He turns and walks further up the road where Jack and Katz are conferring over something tiny in a glass cylinder. Price has a laptop mounted on one of the black FBI cars and is typing something into the database. Will sees the screen flicker to a new page over his shoulder.

Jack looks up from the evidence sample and nods to Will in something that is more and less than a greeting. It's an order and an acknowledgment tied together. His eyes flick to the grotesque scarecrow in the field, back to Will, and then finally return to Katz. She notices Jack's distraction and looks up. She gives Will a small wave. He nods, and they go back to their previous discussion. Zeller makes it to Price's side and pats him on the back. Will drops his eyes and breathes before turning into the cleared aisle in between the rows and rows of corn. The husks scrape indiscriminately at the backs of his hands, and a startled crow leaps up from the ground. Its feathers graze the knuckles of his left hand; feathers like the kind he saw on the stag's powerful legs.

He keeps going. The area is devoid of people, and it's impossible to see out to the street over the high stalks of corn. This was intentional, isolating, meant to instill terror into the man. Will surveys the bloated face as much as he can while avoiding the eyes. His mouth is agape like he used his final breath to scream despite the bloody cut halving his Adam's apple. Will fits his hands into the gloves and probes at the gash in the man's teak-colored throat; bore down upon with enough pressure to sever the vocal cords.

The body has been positioned as if for crucifixion and mounted on the post driven deep into the earth. Will stoops to check the wood closest to the earth; it's supple with the moisture from the rain feeding the soil and the sharp edges of the rectangular plank are splintered. It was staked here long before this man was killed.

His shirt is stained with dried blood. Will lifts it and sees a shiny red vessel all but hollowed out; the pancreas, stomach, and intestines have been lifted and the ribs separated at the sternum to allow for clean removal of the heart, lungs, and kidneys. Will can't tell based on blood flow whether this was done postmortem. Rib separation was technically unnecessary but a surgical necessity to a sternal splitting thoracotomy. It was intentional; his body was left this way on purpose.

Will's eyes track higher and finally catalog the centerpiece of the exhibit: the eyes. The obscene ornaments hang down to the victim's clavicle still attached to the ropy nerves dangling from the orbital sockets. The milky gray pupils have stolen the full space of the cornea. Will breathes through his mouth and drops his hands to the sides. He doesn't have to look any closer to know who did this, but that is also the reason he must. He closes his eyes, and they sting beneath his eyelids. His hands clench into tight fists and tremble. They have been trembling since he got out of the car.

The pendulum swings once, twice, and a third time. It's night. The corpse is gone from the post. Will can feel a weight dragging in his arms as he walks in reverse back to the road. The moment blurs, and he is crouched beside his own car parked right there where the bloodstained earth has been wiped clean by his dreaming mind. He opens his eyes and sees the stars and the moon reflected in the car door. It's a waning crescent tonight, a Cheshire cat's smile.

The parked Taurus pulls up behind his car and stops. This is a fatal mistake.

"Mr. Vartanian approaches, and he does not have a weapon. He suspects nothing and is surprised when I attack him." He stands to his feet with a grace not entirely foreign to his body. There's no room in the recreated fantasy for Will's familiarity with the elegant sway of his limbs as another controls them; no time in between incapacitating the man and lugging him into the cornfield to appreciate the pleasant ripples in the calm he's taken for a home.

"I drag the man directly to the wooden post. I knew beforehand that it would be here. I knew Mr. Vartanian would drive this stretch of road when he did. I knew it was on the way home from work."

There's very little excitement to be had from this. He works the jacket off the man's shoulders and hauls the man up onto the post. Will fixes his forearms to the horizontal planks with twine. If he struggles against it, the wire will bite into his skin and do more harm than good as it cuts off circulation to his hands and cuts through his clothes to get at his skin.

"He has seen my face already, but it is a matter of propriety to cover his face with his shirt. I do this for the access it will provide to his chest cavity and to leave him somewhat presentable afterwards. He will not be a ransacked heap of torn flesh and spilled blood when I am done with him." He will be magnificent, lifted up by the care and precision with which Will exercises in his handling of him.

“I remove the bowels first. This wakes Mr. Vartanian up. He can’t scream, but he tries.” Will drops the intestines into a container. Several of them have been placed here in preparation of the event.

The life pumping out of Mr. Vartanian is a gift, one he didn’t deserve. Will doesn’t know what he did, but he can feel how the offense sits acrid on the back of his tongue. He watches the fear in Mr. Vartanian’s eyes and the dirt sticking to the sweat-smattered skin of his forehead, remembering something he didn’t realize he’d forgotten: a little red haired boy with dirt on his face and a red haired woman with emeralds in her eyes.

He bleeds out, and this is neither a surprise nor a hindrance. Will moves on to open the chest cavity; each plump organ in the palms of his hands is a meal on his tongue. The lungs, the liver, the heart; tenderloin in a hotel room in Williamsport, sirloin steak in Hannibal’s backyard, Quiche Lorraine in the dining room.

His mouth waters, and the scene flickers. He is two beings now battling for the power of perspective. He is himself, and he is the Ripper. He is Will Graham, and he is Hannibal Lecter.

“This is my design.”

He wakes on all fours, clutching mud in his hands. At some point he ripped the gloves off. There is earth and blood sunken in under his nails when he pulls away. His stomach rifts, and his lungs tighten around a dry heave, but nothing comes up. He hasn’t eaten since yesterday; Hannibal fed him an arugula salad with beef bouillon soup and slow-roasted pork shoulder. Will had left for Wolf Trap at nine thirty. Hannibal would have left right after him and caught Yusuf Vartanian coming home from a late shift at the market, the same market he’d taken Will to the day they came home from Pennsylvania and had dinner together.

Will stands, disoriented and thrown off his balance from the erratic beating of his heart. He turns around in a full circle before he remembers the way back to the road; foolish since Vartanian’s corpse points in that direction.

He emerges from the cornfield, and he doesn’t know how long he’s been under. Jack is leaning against the victim’s car and makes his way over. His footsteps cut off abruptly, and Will looks at him questioningly.

“What?”

“You’ve got…” Jack rubs at his chin. Will presses his muddied fingers to his face and comes away with blood. He doesn’t know if it’s his or the victim’s. He presses the back of his hand to his lip, and he comes away bloody but not bleeding. When his stomach heaves this time, he does vomit.

“Is it him?” Jack asks when Will straightens out.

“It’s him.” Will croaks, humbly accepting the water bottle Katz presses into his filthy hand.

“Are you sure?” Will would give almost anything not to be.

“It’s him, Jack.” He thinks his voice carries something forlorn in it that Jack notices but doesn’t comment on. Will rinses his hands with the water and then takes a long drink. “Do you need me?” Jack doesn’t say so right away. He looks from Katz to Zeller and Price where they’re hanging back by the squad car to look on from a distance. Price shrugs.

“No usable prints.” Zeller shakes his head.

“And no DNA evidence from anyone but Vartanian.”

Jack looks to Katz.

“I have a few trace particulates I can test, but I need a lab. There are some fibers, too.” Jack nods and reluctantly dismisses Will. He turns to leave immediately, and no one makes any effort to stop him. He walks away, and he can feel their concern, some bewilderment, and a bite of resignation from Jack; this is what it’s come down to. He anticipated it since that day in the barn with Buddish when he gave Will the chance to opt out and he didn’t take it.

Why didn’t I just take it?

He makes his way down the slope, and the ambulance has disappeared. He wonders briefly if he saw it at all but remembers Zeller was the one who told him it was there to begin with. He gets back in the car and drives for ten minutes with the radio off and the windows up. He’s in Maryland. Five more minutes, and he could be in Hannibal’s driveway. He thinks about it. He thinks about going and waiting for him; he thinks about stopping him once and for all.

But it wouldn’t work. Hannibal would never have made himself so vulnerable to defeat. He would never have allowed his own weaknesses to eclipse Will’s; Will would always need Hannibal more, would always be more loathe to bring him harm.

Will turns the car around and drives to the market instead. He buys organic strawberries, and he looks, but the redhead from before isn’t working. It doesn’t seem as if business is suffering from Yusuf Vartanian’s absence.

He drives down Light Street, turns off on Key Highway, and parks the car in the lot for Rash Field. A few university students are playing volleyball in the sand. Will recognizes a blue Johns Hopkins hoodie on one of the girls. She’s wearing shorts and flip flops, and she laughs when one of the boys throws her over his shoulder and runs with her. It isn’t horribly chilly out. The breeze whispers a faint hint of brine from the estuary of the Chesapeake Bay.

Will sits down on the stone steps a ways from their game with his package of strawberries and stares out into the water as he eats the first one. The girl is a brunette; her hair is dark like Abigail’s. The peals of her laughter sail on the wind, and when Will closes his eyes he can pretend she’s Abigail. He can pretend that a college boy like the barista from the coffee shop scoops her up in his arms on the beach and makes her laugh with pure joy like that. He can pretend that Hannibal is sitting beside him in his fitted jeans and a light jacket eating strawberries with him by the water as the sun sets over the sun-spired buildings.

He eats the entire strawberry and bites into another one before he’s swallowed the earthy calyces. The second one is bittersweet; the first one was just shy of ripe. He eats four more

until he gets the one he wants: sweet with fragile skin. He brushes the filmy layer of the deep red skin with the pad of his index finger and savors the taste in his mouth. It's Sangiovese wine, raspberry cassis, Hannibal's skin, and blood.

Somewhere in the heart of those flavors lies the fresh ripe strawberry itself, but it's largely forgotten. The tiny fruit in Will's hand is a trigger.

He remembers Hannibal kissing him for the first time in his hotel room. He remembers a stifling heat burning his body from the inside out, the simultaneous fear and rapture of Hannibal moving over Will on the bed; the confused blur of the strangling; the emotions pouring out of Hannibal that he didn't know the man could feel, much less that he dealt with them every day.

He remembers sitting in the car with Hannibal outside of the Peter-Herdic House and feeling like he couldn't breathe because Hannibal was touching him and whispering to him. He remembers Hannibal kissing him inside the restaurant where anyone could see; kissing him outside in the cool air; kissing him in the airport to save him from the judging eyes of others. He remembers licking wet strawberry bits from Hannibal's knuckle, taking the finger into his mouth and sucking.

He remembers Casson and the seizure, and he remembers Hannibal's hand in his hair just before he slipped out of consciousness. He remembers Hannibal washing him and dressing him in his most pathetic moment. He remembers Hannibal feeding his dogs. He remembers Hannibal speaking to him, saying, *"I have never met anyone like you."*

"We are equals, Will. We're exactly the same."

He eats another strawberry. His empty stomach clenches around the unwelcome nourishment.

"I could feel it even then."

"How could I have turned away from you?"

Will blinks back his tears, angry at himself for seeking out pleasant memories and torturing himself with them. There are two strawberries left in the package. He looks down upon them and feels sick. They're tiny little hearts beating in his hand. He tears one with his teeth and looks out at the darkening sky. The sweet fruit is ash in his mouth. The inside of his cheek bleeds where he bites it, and the combination of the blood and the ash leaves a charred aftertaste in his mouth.

He remembers Hannibal as the stag, only he can't summon the image of the animal drowning him, piercing him with its antlers. His memories have changed, and now he sees Hannibal with a blade cutting him up, holding his head underwater, pinning him to a burning tree with his beautiful sculptor's hands.

It is Hannibal; it has always been Hannibal.

"Your stag is an impressive creature," Hannibal had said in his office stitching up Will's hand. *"He is showing off for you."*

The irony of it all; his dream of Hannibal as an unruly beast of fire and skeletons and blood and feathers had put Will in Hannibal's office to be sewn back together. He'd touched him back in his dream, and on some subconscious level, he knew that to touch Hannibal was to bring himself immeasurable pain. His flesh had been seared with it in his dream; his hands had been stained with his own blood and with Hannibal's blood, too.

He chews the gritty sepals of the sanguinary strawberry and plucks the last one from the package. It is sweet on his tongue when he bites into it. It reminds him of kiwi slices and pomegranate seeds, of a rich Eton Mess dessert; it reminds him of Abigail smiling and hugging Hannibal, laughing and kissing Will on the cheek.

He remembers a picnic at Port Haven. He remembers Alana saying, *"You'll be good together."*

He remembers Abigail tossing an apple into the air and Hannibal walking beside her with a slight air of possessive pride. He remembers saying, *"I think so, too."*

He stands to his feet and recycles the plastic container in a bright blue receptacle at the mouth of the parking lot. He gets into his car and drives. Hannibal will be home by now. Unless he has business elsewhere, he will be home. His car is in the drive when Will pulls up. His heart pounds in his chest at the sight, but he steels himself. Propelled by the fever in his veins and the rushing in his ears, he walks up and pounds on the door. Hannibal answers, looking a bit taken aback to see Will on his doorstep. He pushes his way in, steps into the hallway to check for guests, and then waits for Hannibal to patiently close the door.

"I believe I have made enough roulades for two if you would care to join me, Will." Hannibal sidesteps around Will and walks into the kitchen. Will notices the garlic and cloves aroma. He follows Hannibal into the kitchen, forgetting the reason for his interruption. Hannibal is wearing the apron again as he places the tightly rolled meat into the oven and sets the timer. Will stops in the doorway to the kitchen. His eyes find the pot over the stove, and his stomach turns, all water and an entire package of strawberries.

"Yusuf Vartanian." Hannibal doesn't even flinch. He continues to bustle about the kitchen with purpose, depositing dishes in the sink. "You killed Yusuf Vartanian."

"Did I?"

"Is that supposed to shake my confidence?" Will steps into the kitchen. It's instantly ten degrees warmer, only in part because of the stove. Hannibal turns to look at Will; he is unimpressed and unshakeable in the calm that surrounds him. He is in his element; Will is not. "You're the Ripper, the *Chesapeake Ripper*, Hannibal. You think I can't tell your handiwork from someone else's?"

"What do you want me to say, Will?"

He draws a completely blank slate. There's nothing either of them can say. Will swallows and backs out of the kitchen. Hannibal sets the turning fork he's holding down on the kitchen island. It catches Will's eye when the light glints off its steel tines.

He's in the clearing with Hannibal, and Hannibal touches his cheek. Will swings blindly at him, and the short-lived violence brings a smile to Hannibal's face. There's an unearthly sound like a siren, and antlers are growing out of their bodies like elephantine wings, like the arms of Shiva. Hannibal's pristine suit tears around the tines as they expand into the black night. Will is naked but for the overcoat he woke up in that first morning in Hannibal's house.

"You'll be ready for me soon. You want to be ready for me. You need me."

He clutches the sides of the coat close to his body but then lets them fall open. He has nothing left that Hannibal hasn't marked up and taken ownership of. Will can feel himself burning when the decision is made deep within him and too ingrained in all that he is to be changed or influenced.

"Yes."

Hannibal smiles, his real one, and takes Will's hands in his. The antlers twist ever higher into the void and gore the sky the way they did seemingly an entire lifetime ago. Will doesn't fight it this time. He knows better than that.

They are unbreakable; they are interlocked. They are mated.

Will whispers, "This is my design."

He opens his eyes, and Hannibal is straddling him, and his tie has been pulled askew. Will blinks at the purpling bruise on Hannibal's cheek, and Hannibal releases his hands.

"What just…?"

"You were screaming." Hannibal eases his weight off of Will's body, but he doesn't get up. "I tried to comfort you, and you struck me." Will looks dazedly at the broken skin on his knuckles.

"You deserved it." Hannibal arches an eye brow at that.

"Some would call that domestic abuse." Will laughs. He actually closes his eyes and laughs, and sometime in the middle of his reverie, Hannibal decides he won't be a problem. Will watches him swing his leg over off of Will's torso and gracefully maneuver his limbs into a kneeling position. Will just looks at him and remembers, and he doesn't know what he came here to say or what he wanted Hannibal to say.

"Have you changed your mind about our relationship, Will?" He ignores the undercurrent of melancholy he thinks he hears in Hannibal's words. He doesn't trust it; he only trusts Hannibal's eyes. They are solemn, unbending, slightly impatient, and uncertain. In the depths of his black pupils Will thinks he detects a true melancholy that goes deeper even than what his words suggested he felt. Will opens his mouth to speak but then closes it again. He exhales deeply out of his nose and lays his head back on the floor.

"You know that I can't do that."

“I thought I would ask.” His voice is airy; the sound of a smile that doesn’t touch his lips but his eyes. Will watches them crinkle just so at the edges and touches the very ends of the creases in Hannibal’s skin with his busted knuckles. He experiences a strange sensation of touching Hannibal but not feeling him, and it has the dangerous, unanchored velocity of an object flung into space with no friction to slow its journey into an abyss of endless dark matter.

He pulls his hand away, but Hannibal catches his wrist in a firm hold that is neither intimate nor violent. It simply holds Will in place and traps the oxygen in his lungs.

“You’ve done something to me.” Hannibal murmurs, leaning back so he can sit down beside Will on the floor.

“How do you mean?” Will’s heart pounds in his chest, and he wonders if Hannibal can hear it. His pupils are dilated, and Will doesn’t know what about his performance tonight engendered such a response, but he doesn’t trust himself to speak outside of a weak line of interrogation.

The sight of Hannibal’s eyes swallowed up with black sparks desire in Will’s belly. He fights it, but his heart has taken the feeling and run wild with it, sending the blood in his body boiling against his better judgment.

They glaze over a murky gray for just a flicker of a second, and it takes Will out of the moment, though his body refuses to play catch up with his mind. Hannibal runs his hand along Will’s stomach as if he can sense the turmoil taking place under the surface of Will’s skin. Hannibal angles his hand so his fingers face Will’s feet and pinches Will’s shirt in his hand so the material rides up to Will’s belly button. Hannibal rotates his hand and touches Will’s skin, and Will’s breath goes ragged. He watches Hannibal assess Will’s bare navel through hooded eyes. Hannibal’s lips part, and Will holds his breath.

He doesn’t speak. He dives down and fixes his lips to Will’s skin and nips and sucks, and Will moans in spite of himself and threads his fingers through Hannibal’s hair, still gelled but welcome to his prying hands. Hannibal breathes against him, and the spit-slicked skin pricks with heightened sensation.

“You don’t know how incredible a specimen you are.”

“You make it sound like I’m a science project.” Will groans, twisting his fingers against Hannibal’s scalp when he moves higher up on Will’s abdomen to worship his ribs, his sternum, and each of his collar bones. He yanks Will’s shirt down and kisses Will on the lips, and Will burns with a need and a hunger and a fire that is entirely his own. He pulls Hannibal by his upper arms to straddle him again.

“What are you then, Will?” Hannibal breathes into his ear and kisses the soft tufts of hair where Will’s hairline meets the cartilage of his ear.

“I thought I was your boyfriend.”

“Do you want to be?” Hannibal teases him, sliding his hot hands up and down Will’s ribcage. He can feel his fingers pressing into his skin to count each rib as his hands pass them up.

“Are you really asking me that?” Will pulls away as much as he can with the floor at his back. Hannibal allows him his illusion of distance. “We’ve had unprotected sex at least half a dozen times since last week. You do that with people you aren’t serious about?” Hannibal smiles and leans down to speak into Will’s throat.

“Stay for dinner, Will. I know of a better way to answer your question than with words.” Will ignores the tingling in his loins and in his stomach. He lets Hannibal help him up, and he doesn’t have to deliver his acquiescence in words.

He follows Hannibal back into the kitchen and contemplates his knuckles.

“Did I really hit you?”

“I did not do this to myself, Will.” Will sits down gingerly at the kitchen island, and Hannibal checks the roulades in the oven. Will looks back at the pot on the stovetop. He shrugs out of his jacket.

“You did it for that cashier, didn’t you? That redhead.”

“Yes, Will.” Will swallows, and his eyes find the brown loaf of meat in the oven.

“What’s in the roulades?”

“Bacon and heart.”

“But it’s not pork belly.”

“No, Will.” Hannibal looks over his shoulder as he unties his apron. “But it never was.” Will swallows and looks away.

“I’m sorry I hit you.”

“I take no offense from it. You were not in your right mind.”

“Am I in my right mind now, doctor?” He rolls the sarcastic words around on his tongue and starts when he feels Hannibal beside him. He takes Will’s arm in one hand and brushes Will’s hair back from his forehead with the other. His front covers the expanse of Will’s back and warms him, stops his heart in his chest.

“Does it feel right, Will?”

“Yes.”

He’ll go to hell for this; they both will, but it doesn’t change how right it feels. Pieces of Yusuf Vartanian’s body cook in Hannibal’s oven, and it smells as delicious as it does any other night. It smells better than it ever does in Will’s kitchen no matter where the food

comes from unless Hannibal made it. Hannibal leans down and presses his lips to Will's pulse. He smiles and releases Will, satisfied.

"Sangiovese?" Will bites his lip, knowing what it means when Hannibal offers him wine. He'll be staying the night. Luckily he fed the dogs before he left for Nottingham.

"Bordeaux." Hannibal nods and steps into the hall.

"Uh, no, wait. Sangiovese." Will corrects with a flush. Hannibal smiles at him all teeth when he returns with the bottle they drank their first night together. Will watches the sweat bead on the neck of the bottle as it chills in the ice bucket, and Hannibal washes the dishes he left in the sink. The turning fork catches the light again like a lightning bug or like fireworks exploding in the sky.

Hannibal cuts the loaf into pinwheels and serves them with Chicken Florentine. He watches Will take the first bite, and Will swears Hannibal's face lights up at Will's small smile. It really is delicious.

Chapter End Notes

The Man Who Sold the World by David Bowie
("What's a David Bowie?" "That's a David Bowie.")
;D

I didn't elaborate much on the food this time around, but here are the recipes I envisioned.

Beef Roulades with Walnut Parsley Pesto
http://www.simplyrecipes.com/recipes/beef_roulades_with_walnut_parsley_pesto/

Chicken Florentine Pesto Pasta
http://www.simplyrecipes.com/recipes/chicken_florentine_pesto_pasta/

Arugula Salad w/ Beets and Goat Cheese
http://www.simplyrecipes.com/recipes/arugula_salad_with_beets_and_goat_cheese/

Beef Bouillon Soup from Oxtails
http://www.simplyrecipes.com/recipes/beef_bouillon_soup_from_oxtails/

Slow-Roasted Pork Shoulder w/ Savory Apple Gravy
http://www.simplyrecipes.com/recipes/slow_roasted_pork_shoulder_with_savory_apple_gravy/

Wild Child

Chapter Summary

Abigail's trap catches a rat.

Chapter Notes

Natural child, terrible child/Not your mother's or your father's child/You're our child, screamin' wild

"My mom is nice. Maybe you'll see her if she comes around one of these days." Nadine drops the long curly orange peel into the heap in between her bare feet. Abigail's wearing a jacket and boots, but Nadine breaks into the bright citrusy fruit without giving any sign that her fingers are locking up from the chill outside.

"What's her name?"

"Rosetta. She likes for people to call her Etta. It's been a while, but I think she might be coming for my birthday next month." Abigail remembers some time ago in therapy Nadine said her mother had Huntington's chorea and that she hadn't been by to visit or call since last year. No one had contacted her since to let her know how much further along the disease had progressed.

Nadine halves the orange with an overly concentrated look on her face. Abigail doesn't want her to think about it.

"How old?"

"Twenty and five." Nadine smiles and offers Abigail half of the peeled orange; Abigail kindly refuses. Nadine shrugs and bites into a slice.

"Are you doing anything for it?" Nadine laughs and doesn't answer.

It's sunny out today. Group isn't until tomorrow, and therapy with Dr. Bloom won't be until the day after. Freddie Lounds came by yesterday to discuss the book, and Abigail mostly didn't listen. Most of her days here are lazy; it's maddening. She sneaks glances at Cora where she's sitting across the terrace. Her workbook is nowhere to be seen. Abigail can't help but be a little relieved for her.

“I guess they’re trying a new approach.” Nadine smirks when she catches Abigail looking. There’s a nurse sitting beside Cora with binoculars pointing at some birds sitting on a power line that Abigail can see from where she and Nadine are sitting farther away; just pigeons and a sparrow, maybe a dove farther on the right.

“Why do they treat her like they own her?” Abigail murmurs distastefully with an uncomfortable twinge of sharp anger constricting her throat. Cora is happy making friends. They should let her make friends.

“They might as well. She’ll never get out of here.” Nadine shakes her head when Abigail looks at her, startled and wide-eyed. “There’s no way for them to know if she’s better. She won’t speak to them or learn sign language. Any time they give her a pen and paper to write with she crumples it up and throws it away.”

“For as long she’s been here?” Nadine nods.

“Since her mother moved. I don’t think she really wants them to help her. I guess I can’t blame her, but…I wish there was a way to let her know there are better things out there than what happened to her; better places than here.”

There’s an entire world of better places out there that Cora refuses to see because a terrible man reduced what she could see of it to a bloody, miserable forest. There are infinite opportunities Cora could experience that she won’t because her doctors can’t understand her. Her son is out there growing up without his mother because of them and their authoritarian approach to fixing her. They can’t find a way to make her open up to them when Abigail had done it and when Nadine had probably done it, too. This place is a tar pit for people like Cora.

Abigail swallows down her rage. It won’t be a tar pit for her.

“Abigail Hobbs? Where is Abigail Hobbs?” Abigail turns to look over her shoulder. “Abig—You.” There stands Nurse Trudy with her mock journal and a furious expression on her red face. “You come with me.” Nadine looks confused. For a moment, she even looks terrified as if Trudy must have meant to call her name instead of Abigail’s.

“Where are we going?” Trudy approaches her and throws the book down beside her. Nadine furrows her brows at the little diary and gives Abigail a curious look. There’s wonder in her eyes and mischief.

“We’re going to the hospital administrator, and we’re going to talk about your vicious threats against my life.”

Abigail wants to laugh. *Vicious, what a joke.*

“Something about the apple not falling far from the tree.” Nadine muses. Though she says it more to prod at Nurse Trudy, Abigail feels it stick in her chest like something both prideful and repugnant. She can be that vicious animal, but she isn’t. Nurse Trudy would know that if she’d paid any attention to the rest of the journal; would know Abigail wrote that stupid line about stabbing her just to catch her brownnosing.

“You mind your business, Miss Dufort.” She turns back to Abigail. “I’ve called Dr. Bloom, and she’s on her way down here right now.” Her tone is meant to be threatening, but Abigail only hears a petulant fury that she struggles to take seriously.

Abigail gets to her feet and calmly dusts off the backs of her jeans. She sees Cora watching her from the corner of her eye and figures any other rules she breaks will be moot in comparison to this nonsense with Trudy. She turns to give her a smile, and Cora smiles back. Trudy huffs an exasperated sigh when Abigail walks off and leaves the journal on the ground where Trudy threw it. Her privacy obviously wasn’t respected, so Abigail makes no effort to respect her.

They walk inside together, Trudy holding Abigail by the arm but not hard like Diane did. She leaves Abigail in a quiet waiting room down the front hall and bustles off somewhere after pointedly placing the journal in Abigail’s lap. She leafs through it, bored. A few minutes tick by before she begins to read through it more attentively. She finds an entry about Cora:

I wonder what Noah looks like, if he has her eyes. He must be pretty big by now; not a baby anymore. What would she say about him if she could speak?

Cora is an enigma and a pipe dream. Abigail doesn’t hope to ever solve her or get close enough to try. It would make the time in here go by much faster, but Dr. Bloom has already put her foot down on the issue. Asking her to change her mind wouldn’t help anything. She’s set herself back so far already that to even think about broaching the subject again is a laughable concept.

Abigail flips through a few more pages and finds an entry about Dr. Lecter. She remembers she wrote it after their dinner with Will.

I never had quiche before tonight. I didn’t think I’d like it, but it was good. Dr. Lecter can really cook. How does he find the time if he works all day? I bet he can multitask. He’d be a great soccer mom, even if I can’t picture him driving a minivan or coaching from the stands. That’d be more Will’s thing.

The door from the hallway swings open, and in walks Dr. Bloom looking less than pleased but not exactly displeased. She sits beside Abigail and a loaded few seconds of perfect silence passes between them. Dr. Bloom opens a magazine and skims the lines with her eyes. Abigail looks, and she does appear to actually be reading. For a moment she thinks their time waiting will be spent like this, but Dr. Bloom speaks.

“Do you want to tell me your side?” She doesn’t look up from the magazine. Her eyes are still zigzagging back and forth slowly down the page. They stop when Abigail moves to answer.

“I tested a hypothesis.” She can see Dr. Bloom analyzing her words in her head.

“You thought someone was reading your journal,” She sits up and locks eyes with Abigail. “So you set a trap.”

“The administrator’s office is a trap.”

“The journal itself is bait.” Abigail doesn’t like the phrasing of her conclusion, so she remains quiet, not wanting to own up to it. “If you thought someone was invading your privacy, Abigail, why didn’t you come to me?”

“Without proof I would’ve looked paranoid.”

“Threatening someone’s safety just to confirm your suspicion about them makes you look paranoid, Abigail.”

“And making accusations without evidence makes me a slanderer.” She challenges, having thought this debate through to last counterpoint. “If she hadn’t read my journal she wouldn’t have been threatened in the first place. It doesn’t mean anything.” Abigail holds the journal up like an auction paddle. “It’s not just my privacy that was violated. I wrote about Dr. Lecter and Will Graham in here, too; about their relationship and about my relationship with them.”

Abigail examines Dr. Bloom’s face as the woman sighs, contemplating Abigail’s words. She’s about to speak when the door to the Admin Office swings open. A stout man with a toupee and thick glasses stands in the doorway and waves them in. He buzzes his secretary to call Nurse Trudy into the waiting room after he closes the door behind him. He’s fifty maybe with a kind face and a dimple in one cheek when he smiles even a little bit. He waves for Dr. Bloom and Abigail to sit. The nameplate on the big mahogany desk reads Jeffrey Pearce, M.D.

“Dr. Bloom.”

“Dr. Pearce.”

“And Miss Hobbs, we’ve not had the pleasure of meeting yet.” He leans over the desk to shake hands with Abigail. He has a firm but gentle grip. “Well, I suppose we ought to just cut right to the chase. Some of the nurses have brought it to my attention that there’s been a, um, disturbance regarding Miss Hobbs and Trudy Jacobson. Would you care to elaborate for me what happened?”

Some of the nurses.

“Abigail believed one of the nurses was reading from her private journal.”

“And I expect you were right, Miss Hobbs?” He addresses Abigail. As official and clinical as he looks with his shiny pocket protector and with the wall of degrees and awards behind him, Abigail continually sees the softer elements in him vying for air time. He wants to be exacting, but he wants to be fair about it; he wants to be disciplinary, but he wants to help Abigail in whatever way he can.

He can be persuaded to see things her way. It won’t be difficult.

Abigail nods, and Dr. Jeffrey Pearce nods solemnly in response. She has him already, and she hasn’t said a word.

“There’s nothing officially in our policy regarding the staff’s handling of a patient’s personal diary, but there are obvious ethical and moral breaches at work here. Dr. Bloom, I assume you issued the diary as a condition of therapy?”

“I did.” Dr. Bloom appears to weigh her next words carefully before she voices them. “And I gave Abigail my word that I wouldn’t read it.” Dr. Pearce considers this with a crease between his thick eye brows.

“I understand there was an unsavory passage in its pages. Miss Hobbs, what did you write about Miss Jacobson?”

Abigail gives Dr. Bloom a questioning look and bites her lip when she nods. She looks down at her lap, chagrined to be put on the spot. This is the moment that will define whether she is punished or let off the hook. She pinches at the corners of the hardcover book on her thigh. Dr. Bloom says her name softly, urging her to speak.

Abigail sighs and tonelessly repeats what she wrote, verbatim: “Sometimes I think about waiting in the garden for Nurse Trudy when she takes out the trash in the morning and stabbing her with one of her pencils. See if she writes that down on her clipboard.”

Dr. Pearce’s eye brows do funny things for a moment as he thinks about how to respond. He clears his throat.

“I see, and what inspired you to write that?”

“I just knew whoever read it wouldn’t ignore it. They’d make a scene, and I’d know who it was that was poking into my business.”

“Your methods, while somewhat…ill-advised, aren’t entirely irrational, Miss Hobbs, but why Miss Jacobson? There must have been a reason you singled her out.” Dr. Bloom turns to look at Abigail, and Abigail stares at the wall, trusting Dr. Bloom to speak for her when she realizes Abigail doesn’t plan on giving an answer. She doesn’t disappoint.

“Abigail, is this about Cora Armistead?” Dr. Bloom actually sounds surprised, as if she can’t believe Abigail would act out for the sake of making a connection with another person. Abigail’s not sure either if that’s why she did it.

“Cora Armistead?” He echoes Dr. Bloom’s surprise as well as a healthy bit of curiosity. “Was she violent toward you?”

“What? No, of course not. Cora’s sweet.”

“Abigail.” She turns to look at Dr. Bloom.

“She is. Just because she doesn’t talk to me doesn’t mean I don’t know what she’s like.”

“What is your opinion of Cora Armistead, Abigail—if I may call you Abigail?” She doesn’t object. Dr. Pearce folds his hands on his desk and leans forward. More of his goodwill is evident on his face and in the intrigued tone of his voice. He’s forgotten about the journal. He wants to know about Cora; he wants to know how to reach her. Abigail gives Dr. Bloom a

mildly apologetic look, but she isn't sorry. She didn't mean for their conversation to take this turn, but she doesn't intend to let it go to waste.

"I think she's lonely." He nods emphatically, in total agreement. Abigail thinks about a baby boy named Noah, and she thinks about Cora asking her not to leave. She thinks about Cora's soft smile in the garden. A chill runs through her thinking about the man who hurt her so badly, and her jaw clenches reflexively.

"There was a disagreement between you and Miss Jacobson over the handling of Cora Armistead?"

"She basically dragged me out of the room; made Cora cry because of it. She tried to talk to me, but her tongue…"

"Yes, she bit it off almost five years ago." Dr. Pearce ponders the passage of time. Nadine told her it happened two years ago. She doesn't voice her confusion. "But she made an effort to converse with you?" He blinks thoughtfully. "Dr. Bloom, were you aware of this?"

"I didn't know she actually spoke to Abigail," She turns a wary eye on Abigail and then returns her gaze to Dr. Pearce. "The nurses had informed me of prior incidents involving Cora and Abigail, but they didn't mention that she tried to speak either."

"Incidents." Dr. Pearce repeats.

"Wherein Abigail interacted with Cora."

"The nurses informed you, why?" Somewhere in between his bewilderment and Dr. Bloom's reply, Abigail knows she's won.

"They wanted me to put a stop to Abigail's relationship with her."

"Dr. Bloom," He rubs at his chin. "In all the seven years that she's been here, we have tried to be optimistic about her treatment, yes?" Dr. Bloom hesitates, but she nods. "Any developments we can make with Cora Armistead would be positive developments. Tell me, how likely are we to receive promising results if the same methods we've been using for years aren't working?" Dr. Bloom purses her lips. She's just as good at reading between the lines as Abigail is, if not better.

"You're proposing we expose Abigail to Cora Armistead. What do you think that will that accomplish?"

"I think two young girls experiencing hardship could become friends and maybe find the healing they so desperately need." Abigail wants to roll her eyes at the sentimentality, but he's right. He's only saying what she wants to be a reality out loud. She won't look a gift horse in the mouth. "Abigail is your patient, Dr. Bloom. I wouldn't propose anything concrete if you didn't agree with my suggestion. I would, however, like to see where Cora Armistead stands on the matter." He looks back to Abigail.

“Miss Jacobson will do well in the future to leave your private thoughts with your doctor, Abigail. If she harasses you further, please take it up with me rather than taking matters into your own hands.” Abigail frowns at the look Dr. Bloom gives her. “For your end, Miss Jacobson has assured me that an apology will suffice.” He stands and moves to the door to let Nurse Trudy into the room. Without preamble, he says, “Miss Hobbs?”

Abigail stands, knowing this is the price to pay for Cora’s peace even if it makes her feel a little bit sick. Trudy looks a touch more repentant, all her anger having dissipated during her long wait outside.

“I’m sorry I wrote those things about you. I didn’t mean them.” Abigail aims for heartfelt. It’s not difficult since she really didn’t mean what she wrote, even if she’s not exactly sorry. “I just wanted to catch whoever it was that was reading from my journal. I didn’t like feeling like my privacy was being disrespected.”

“Did you think *I* read it?” Abigail’s eye brows twitch downward. Trudy looks honestly baffled. “Diane told me she heard you telling Nadine nasty things about me in the garden and that you’d written it all in there. She tried to show it to me, but I wouldn’t look at it. I only expected the worst because I thought you were still upset about Cora.” She remembers her station and shifts out of apology mode. “I only told you to leave her be so she’d work on her math. It does her good to have her mind occupied.”

“Miss Jacobson, you’re saying Diane Mulloy read the diary?” Pearce steps behind his desk and sits. Trudy looks uncomfortable, only now realizing that she’s outed her co-worker. “Dr. Bloom, you and Abigail may go. Miss Jacobson and I will discuss this matter further with Miss Mulloy.”

Dr. Bloom stands to her feet. Trudy takes the vacated seat guiltily and fidgets with the hem of her shirt.

“Oh, and Dr. Bloom, about the other topic we touched upon?” Dr. Bloom surveys Abigail’s face and then flicks her eyes to the floor.

“I need to speak to Cora Armistead before I make my decision.” He happily nods his approval, and Abigail makes her exit with Dr. Bloom. She just hears Dr. Pearce buzz his secretary again to summon Nurse Diane. Abigail walks beside Dr. Bloom down the hallway.

“Next time, Abigail, come to me before you manipulate the entire hospital staff to get what you want.” Abigail stops walking, and Dr. Bloom turns to study her.

“You think that’s what I did?”

“I think the diary was a clever ruse to weed out a spy; its efficacy hid the true objective.”

“To make friends with Cora.”

“To assert dominance and authority over the staff by winning the privilege of a friendship with Cora.” Dr. Bloom corrects. Before Abigail can object, she continues: “The kind of

behavior doesn't sit well with me, but I could understand it if you did it because you feel trapped here. Do you, Abigail; feel trapped?"

Abigail swallows down a burst of air and denial. She averts her eyes to the distracted orderlies shuffling around them in the high traffic hallway. Her eyes stop on Oscar where he's hunched over a trash can to fit a new lining around the edges of the bin. His lips are moving but no one's around him; she thinks he's probably singing.

"Yes." Abigail says, hating how quiet her voice sounds. Dr. Bloom nods, serious but true to her word, understanding. After a drawn out moment she sighs.

"Do you know where to find Cora?"

"Last I saw her she was in the garden." Abigail says nothing about Dr. Bloom's analysis of her. They just walk together through the halls until they reach the door to the garden. Abigail can see Cora's blonde hair catching the sunlight. She's still sitting where she was before on the other side of the terrace, only the nurse has left her on her own. Abigail goes to open the door but stops. She looks around to make sure the coast is clear.

"Do you know how long Nadine Dufort has been here? I mean, has she been here as long as Cora?" Dr. Bloom is still put off with Abigail, if only a little bit, but she seems interested enough in this line of inquiry to engage with Abigail.

"Why?"

"She told me she was here when Cora bit her tongue, only she said it happened two years ago."

"You heard Dr. Pearce say it happened five years ago." Dr. Bloom takes a deep breath. "Abigail, I can't disclose information about other patients with you. You'll have to ask Nadine."

"I think she's confused." Abigail protests. She removes her hand from the doorknob. "She said she thinks her mom is going to come see her for her birthday next month, but in group…" Abigail stops herself, realizing she's breaking a confidence. "Um, never mind. Forget I asked." She opens the door before Dr. Bloom can say anything and feels very certain of the fact that she will lose her mind if she has to stay in this place as long as Cora has.

Dr. Bloom hangs back as Abigail presses on in Cora's direction. One of the nurses Abigail doesn't know by name goes to block her but stops and takes a step back instead. She turns to glance over her shoulder to confirm the hard set of Dr. Bloom's jaw. To Abigail, she nods her head.

"Cora," She says softly when she comes up to stand beside her. Cora jerks a little at the sound of her own name but relaxes when she sees Abigail. She hums in greeting and smiles a little bit. Abigail smiles back. "Can I sit?" She nods, and Abigail sits beside her. Dr. Bloom takes a seat on one of the benches a few feet off, the embodiment of permission and supervision. Abigail speaks loudly enough for Dr. Bloom to hear.

“Done with trigonometry, I see.” Cora rolls her eyes, the quintessential teenager trapped in a grown woman’s body. “Nurse Trudy says it was just to keep your mind occupied. Did it work?” Cora looks sad when she shakes her head no. Something occurs to her, and Abigail can see the worry shift subtly across her forehead and in her shining eyes.

She points at Abigail and makes several signs with her fingers. Abigail feels a surprised rush of breath jump through her body. She hears Dr. Bloom say, “She’s spelling, Abigail.”

“Oh, um…” Cora looks from Dr. Bloom’s shocked face to Abigail’s and starts over, slower this time. Abigail squints at each unknown symbol and can only make out the last two letters: “D” and “Y.” She smiles when she gets it. “Oh, Trudy.”

Cora nods happily, though the worry doesn’t leave her face. Abigail remembers she pointed at her before spelling it.

“Trudy and I are fine. There was a misunderstanding.” Cora points at Abigail again. “No, I’m not in any trouble.” Her sigh is relieved but something else, too. She’s happy that Abigail understands her so easily. It’s hardly any trouble at all really. Most of what Cora is trying to say Abigail can decipher from her pale green eyes. She turns to look at Dr. Bloom but finds that she’s disappeared, and all the nurses in the garden are making a point of ignoring them.

“Nadine told me you couldn’t sign.” Abigail turns to face Cora, and they share in a very girlish bit of laughter. Cora shakes her head, her smile a little bit wider on her face but not by much. Cora slots her thumb in between her middle and ring fingers. When Abigail shakes her head a little bit, Cora shapes her thumb and forefinger into the shape of an “L,” moves her thumb back in between her ring and pinky fingers, and then back to its initial place in between her middle and ring fingers where it lingers for a moment. The letter after that is an “O.”

She replaces her thumb in between her middle and ring fingers: the letter “N.”

“Nadine?” Cora nods and then shakes her head.

“Not Nadine? Or oh, you mean…” Abigail blinks her confusion. “What do you mean, no?” Cora shrugs, unable to give a clearer sign of what she means that Abigail will understand. She looks off over the wall in contemplation and then sparks with an idea. She stands abruptly and pulls Abigail to her feet by the wrist. Abigail follows her inside like that and watches the nurses bristle as they pass. They had been prepared to rip Cora off of Abigail at the first sign of violence. Since their intervention is unnecessary they don’t know how to handle themselves. Cora releases Abigail once they get to the corridor where the library is located.

Cora walks up to the first nurse she sees, a tall man named Evander, and exaggeratedly pantomimes drawing with a pencil. Evander smiles and gives her a crayon and a large sketchpad; moderately safe unless swallowed and dull to the point of not being able to break skin.

Abigail walks with Cora to a long table and sits across from her. She watches Cora roll the blue crayon in between the thumb and first two fingers of her left hand. She begins to write.

The crayon is a little bit wobbly in her hand. Abigail wonders how long it's been since she's actually written more than just numbers in a trigonometry workbook. Cora reconsiders what she's written, scratches out a word, and modifies the scrawled letters a second time before rotating the sketchpad on the table and pushing it towards Abigail. She reads it through twice.

"Nadine lies about a lot of things."

Something heavy drops in Abigail's stomach, and she can't explain what caused it or why it scares her. She scans their corner of the spacious room and deems it safe enough to speak her mind.

"She told me you had a son, Noah. Is that true?" Cora blinks, swallows hard, and nods yes. "And his father?"

Cora reaches across the table to write on the bit of the sketchpad closest to her. Abigail reads the upside down writing.

"Just a lonely man."

"What did she lie about then?" Cora hums and writes. She doesn't flip the sketchpad after. She knows Abigail reads the words as soon as the crayon leaves them.

"How I lost my tongue."

Abigail knows now what the fear deep inside her is; knows that it's dread because she doesn't want to but she needs to know. She asks, "How did you?"

The crayon snaps in Cora's fingers, and she stares down at it gloomily. She pinches the rounded nub in between her thumb and middle finger and writes, and Abigail looks hard out the window. Even after Cora turns the sketchpad and bumps it against Abigail's hands where they're resting on the table, Abigail can't make herself read the words on the page. Cora hums in question, drawing Abigail's eyes to her own.

She makes the sign for "OK" and raises her eye brows once. Abigail nods after a moment, but Cora shakes her head. She makes the sign again and nods at the sketchpad. Abigail can almost hear her say, *"It's okay."*

Abigail licks her lips and looks down at the words on the page. The consistency of the waxy crayon forces the words to be large and rounded in order to be legible. Abigail reads them slowly, the low music of Cora's voice speaking them in her mind.

"He took it when the park rangers found us in Devil's Den.
Pulled me in like he meant to kiss me and bit it clean out of my mouth.
The police report says I bit it, but it wasn't me. It was him.
Anson took it from me.
Anson took everything."

Abigail pushes the sketchpad away as gently as she can, though her hands shake. She doesn't know what she feels; terror mixed with infuriation mangled with an unapologetic curiosity.

“Noah?” Cora bites her lip and shakes her head. Abigail doesn’t ask. She can’t. She doesn’t know if she’ll ever be able to.

“Hey, ladies. Dinnertime.” Evander peeks out from behind a bookshelf and walks away. Abigail tears the paper from the sketchpad and crumples it in her hand like a dirty secret to be buried. Cora plucks it out of the palm of her hand and straightens it out on the table. She tears the wrinkled page into about fifteen strips, lines them up neatly, and rips them into thirds. She sets the neatly destroyed paper back in Abigail’s hand and smiles weakly when Abigail crushes it in her fist again. They toss the shreds into the trash and go to the cafeteria for dinner.

There’s chicken pot pie with mashed potatoes and gravy, and Abigail actually likes the smell and look of it. They each get a hefty serving of the steaming stuff with biscuits on the side. Abigail observes the way Cora eats. She takes her potatoes without gravy, which the cook knows, no doubt, because Cora always eats the mashed potatoes. Cora is very particular about how far she’ll open her mouth to take a bite. Much of the chicken pot pie smears on her lips because of this. Abigail focuses her attention to her own plate. She wonders, almost despondently, if Hannibal would make chicken pot pie for her if she asked.

Hannibal.

The thought combined with the warmth of comfort food and a buttery biscuit makes Abigail feel content and sated and sleepy. She eyes the hallway where the phones are located. She wants to talk to Will or Hannibal before bed.

Will or Hannibal, Will and Hannibal.

Cora hums and nods her chin with a curious glint in her eyes. Abigail realizes she’s smiling.

“Just thinking about…” She deliberates in her head. “My…”

After a few moments of patiently waiting, Cora sets her plastic spork down beside her tray. She holds her hands so her palms face Abigail, both shaped like the sign for “OK.” Her fingers touch at the center like two birds’ beaks. She fans her hands out and twists her wrists so her pinkies connect at the end. She bites her lip and says, “Fum.”

“Family.” Abigail smiles. Cora nods and takes up her fork again. “Family.” Abigail says to herself again, softly. She’d come to that conclusion before, but saying it, and not as a question, holds so much weight. It is a heavy but sweet press of gravity in her chest. She mimics the hand sign, and Cora watches. Abigail gets it right on the first try, and Cora beams with pride.

Abigail doesn’t have to ask if Cora feels the strange sense of budding kinship stirring warmly in her chest. She can see it in Cora’s secretive little smile like she’s both disarmed and hopelessly relieved to have been found at last. Abigail felt that way when Hannibal said he would protect her, that he and Will both would protect her. She felt it when Will confirmed it for her. She feels that way when Cora huffs her tiny silent laugh and takes a dainty bite of her biscuit, the crumbs speckling her bottom lip and her chin.

She and Cora sit together and eat in silence after that. They part ways in the hallway when Abigail explains that she is going to make a phone call. Cora nods and goes off on her way without much fuss. Abigail's glad she doesn't make a big deal out of it. She falls into one of the empty seats and dials Hannibal's home number. She has it committed to memory.

Eight rings go by, and Abigail wonders if he might not be home. He could be at Will's. It's late enough already that she thinks he should at least be back from work. Her meeting with Dr. Bloom and Dr. Pearce ran pretty late, and she had been with Cora for almost an hour. She checks her watch for the time: eight fifteen. She thinks about hanging up and trying later.

Before she can disconnect the call, Will answers the phone on the tenth ring flustered and breathless. He sounds immediately concerned, which Abigail smiles at.

"Hello? Uh, Dr. Lecter's phone."

"Hi, Will."

"Oh, Abigail." Relief; adorable relief. "I read the Caller ID and thought something might be wrong."

"Why would anything be wrong?" She teases with the slightest bite. Will stammers. She clearly caught him in the middle of something that had monopolized on his ability to digest and produce witty banter. "Have I interrupted…something?" Will positively balks, and Abigail grins.

"No! It's not like that. I mean, it is, you know, but it's not—I'm…" His voice moves farther away from the receiver. *"Hannibal, it's Abigail."* She hears some rustling and a low chuckle.

"Hello, Abigail."

"Hi." She leans one elbow on the table.

"I hope the evening finds you well." He rumbles, sounding very much like what Abigail imagines a purring lion would sound like. She definitely interrupted something.

"Yeah, I'm okay. I just wanted to…talk for a minute, if that's okay?"

It probably isn't, and she would completely understand if Hannibal refused, but he doesn't, of course, and that somehow makes her heart feel lighter than air.

"Have you been staying out of trouble, Abigail?" Hannibal huffs a sigh like he's just sat down or maybe rolled over in bed. Abigail tries not to think too much about the logistics since it's so obvious what they were just doing with each other. She doesn't care as much as she expected to. There's hardly any room to be surprised since she's known about them for so long now. They seem right together; people who are right together have sex if they feel like it. She doesn't even feel awkward so much as she just thinks the whole situation is an iota short of hilarious.

She hears a clattering on the other end of the line and the quiet sound of Will swearing. Something else clatters loudly, and Abigail can't help the giggle it summons out of her.

Hannibal laughs, too, a little bit.

“Or had Will no reason to worry about your wellbeing when you called?”

“I wouldn’t say I got into trouble today.” Abigail hedges.

“What would you say instead?”

“I would say I caught a nurse snooping through my diary and that I made a friend.”

“And did you obtain justice for yourself?”

“I think she got punished. They made me leave the room before they talked to her about it, but the administrator didn’t seem too happy.”

“I should imagine not; quite discourteous to invade another’s privacy like that.” Abigail examines her nails; getting on the long side. “Tell me about your friend.”

“Her name’s Cora.” Abigail starts, setting her hand in her lap. “She can’t speak because of something that happened when she was kidnapped a few years ago, and the nurses wouldn’t let me talk to her at first because they thought I’d be a bad influence or vice versa. I don’t really know.” She shrugs. Although he can’t see her, she somehow feels like he can tell that she’s doing it.

“She was institutionalized because of this incident?”

“Well, I think there was something else, but since she can't speak much, she doesn’t make an effort to communicate with anyone.”

“Except for with you.” Hannibal’s voice has warmth in it, a smile. It brings a smile to her face, too.

“She trusts me. I understand her.”

“And your Cora, did her captor seduce her?” Abigail is stunned by the intuitive leap.

“They have a child together, a son. I think he maybe did seduce her, but she hasn’t told me.”

“A modern day Persephone stolen away by Hades.” He concludes crisply, and the leap makes more sense. “Did you know Persephone’s other name was Kore? Quite the coincidence.” Abigail nods, understanding his train of thought now. “I wonder if she appreciates the parallels.”

“Telling her might upset her.” Abigail wipes her hands on her pants and looks around. “She told me some things that upset me.”

“What did she tell you?” She hears the crinkling of static that betrays movement; Hannibal is sitting up, maybe.

“She said he bit her tongue out of her mouth when police found them.” She shivers.

“And that image disturbs you?”

“I guess I just don’t like that it happened to her, that someone hurt her that way and it can’t… I mean, there’s no way to fix it so she’ll be able to speak again.”

“Do you know the man’s name who hurt your friend?”

“Um, Anson. She didn’t give a last name.” She hears him take a deep breath in.

“Anson Huxley, diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. I followed the case; that was five years ago.”

“Do you know what happened to him?”

“I believe he killed himself in Wakefield, in a psychiatric secure unit.”

“Wakefield?”

“Yes, he was European-born; an Englishman from West Yorkshire.” Something clatters on the other line, and Abigail realizes she’s imposing upon Hannibal’s time with Will.

“Well, I guess I feel better that he’s dead now, or not better but safer.” There’s a pause.

“I would never allow for anyone to hurt you, Abigail.” Her eyes prick with tears. Her own father, her biological father, had hurt her, immeasurably. She wants to ask what she ever did to deserve the security and protection he constantly providers her with, but she can’t form the words. “Nor would Will.”

“Is she okay?” She hears Will’s voice muffled, away from the receiver.

“Will would like to speak with you.” He hands the phone off, and Will sputters a little bit. He hadn’t actually requested the phone, so he has nothing prepared.

“Are you okay?” Abigail smiles.

“Yeah, everything’s fine. I’m actually gonna go to bed. It’s been a long day.” She figures that works in lieu of, *I’m going to let you and your man get back to it.*

He seems to understand, if his embarrassment is any indication. He laughs softly.

“Well, you can call us whenever you need to.” There’s some more rustling. She does imagine him lying down next to Hannibal now, swathed in his arms and resting his head on the man’s chest. He sighs and says, “We’re never too busy to talk to you.”

What a strangely beautiful, paternal thing to say. Abigail’s smile stretches into a grin. She doesn’t care that his words are cliché or that he had to stammer through them; it doesn’t matter because however the sentiment was delivered, Will means it. He and Hannibal both mean it.

“I know. Goodnight, Will. And goodnight to Hannibal, too.”

“She says goodnight, Hannibal.” She can hear his smile and Hannibal’s subsequent rumbled response. “Night, Abigail.”

They hang up, and Abigail sits for a moment more before standing and walking up to her room. She sits on her bed and reaches for her journal where she keeps it beside her bed and stares at the empty drawer, confused. She thinks about where she left it last and thinks she may have left it in the library. She walks back downstairs and finds it on the table with a scrap of paper poking out toward the back.

She opens it to the marked page and finds six shredded pieces of paper fitted together. They read: *“Nadine lies about a lot of things.”*

Beneath it is a labored, waxy line of otherwise neat handwriting. Nadine put it there, of course. Nadine wrote in her journal.

“I’m not the only one.”

Abigail tears the page out, and the page behind it has one word written in thick letters. Flecks of green wax have been pressed into the page from too much pressure on the crayon. Abigail shuts the book and stands. She doesn’t have to read it. She’s seen it spray painted on her parents’ house; she’s seen it in her nightmares.

She finds Oscar in the lobby with a large trash can on wheels and disinfectant strapped to his belt. They spot each other, and she makes a beeline for the half-filled bin to throw the journal inside. She notices she’s breathing hard when Oscar gives her a tissue for the tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Georgina, no. Principessa, it’s okay.”

She sniffles and throws the used tissue into the trash so it buries the journal.

“Why do you call me Georgina, Oscar?” His eyes aren’t confused, though she knows he probably can’t see her all the way.

“It’s my daughter’s name; you look like her, and you’re nice like her.” He shrugs. “I know you’re not her, but it gives me peace to think that you could be.”

“Where is she?” Abigail wipes at her eyes. Oscar keeps his eyes on the floor and mops.

“Oh, she died some time ago; her and the wife, in a car accident.”

Her father could have become this man; aged and alone, the only visions of what he loved present in the blurred faces of strangers.

Or maybe he already was that man when Will shot him, and the girls he killed were blurred faces; a blur of her own face.

“Goodnight, Oscar.”

“Goodnight, principessa.” He mops the floor and doesn’t look up, but Abigail can see the tear that escapes from the corner of his eye. She flees to her room and lies down with her pillow clutched tightly in her arms. She’ll ask Dr. Bloom for a new journal tomorrow. She’ll tell her she misplaced the one from before or that it’s been robbed of its secrecy. She’ll tell her a dog ate it or an eagle snatched it from her, anything.

She thinks about the haiku she wrote about Will:

Ambrosial muscle
Bleeds red life and promises
We will honor him

She thinks about eating his heart and about Hannibal and Will both encouraging her to do so.

The day’s events have left her feeling exhausted. She falls asleep quickly and dreams about a single word scribbled across a page and painted across the garage of her old home.

In her dream Hannibal offers her a beating heart emanating steam from its warm shivering vessel. They’re crouched over Nadine’s squirming body, and when Abigail takes the fist-sized organ from him uncertainly, Hannibal smiles and says, *“It’s ours to share.”*

Abigail tears into the heart with her teeth, and Nadine screams the word from the page. She screams, *“Cannibals!”*

Her blood tastes like cranberry lemonade and kiwis. She doesn’t stop until Hannibal makes her.

“Cannibals, cannibals…” Nadine protests weakly from her paling body. She’s begun to droop into the floor, and she looks neither petite nor athletic. She just looks weak and on the verge of death.

“Quite discourteous to invade one’s privacy like that.” Hannibal shakes his head and leans down to sever the artery connecting what’s left of her heart to her body with his teeth. Nadine twitches once and fades. She becomes Nick, she becomes her father, she becomes a faceless man who hurt Cora and who deserved to die a thousand more deaths like this one if he hadn’t already killed himself. She becomes some androgynous manifestation of Hades.

When the body vanishes into nothing, they are on a beach that she’s never seen or been to before. Where there was blood, now there is only sand. Will is lying flat on the ground, but she can feel his stomach expand with breath beneath the back of her head. He’s only asleep. Hannibal is sitting upright on the other side of him. Abigail sits up carefully so as to avoid waking Will and watches the sunrise paint the sky and the sea different colors. Hannibal watches it, too, and doesn’t turn to look at her when he says, *“I would never allow for anyone to hurt you, Abigail. Nor would Will.”*

Abigail nods, and he leans over Will’s prone sleeping form to kiss her on the forehead. The deep navy of the sky brightens to a teal color before bathing everything in pale blue morning light. Will stirs but doesn’t wake. He reaches for Abigail’s hand in his sleep, and she holds him and watches the waves wash up onto the shore with Hannibal. She sees Cora wading in

the shallow end of the water with a baby. She sprinkles water on the baby's head and smiles at Abigail. Abigail smiles back even as the waves pull Cora under and she doesn't resurface.

There are pistachios in her hand. She eats them and throws the shells into the water.

Break On Through (To The Other Side)

Chapter Summary

Hannibal has a late lunch with Will, and they have a heart to heart.

Chapter Notes

I found an island in your eyes/Country in your arms/Arms that chain/Eyes that lie/Break on through to the other side

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will shows up out of breath and red in the face in the parking lot of Hannibal's practice at one thirty. He huffs around a grin and says, "I hope you haven't eaten yet."

Hannibal has not, unfortunately. He skipped breakfast that morning, and his most recent appointment ran over half an hour late. He had wanted to catch a quick lunch in town, maybe someplace like Café Zen where the chefs in the kitchen moved quickly and provided healthy, savory Chinese cuisine.

Will is holding a brown paper bag with a small round grease stain in the side. If he brought Hannibal a burger, so help him…

"The Golden West." Will gestures to the bag as Hannibal begins to walk with him through the parking lot. "Have you been there?"

Hannibal answers in the negative and allows Will to lead the way to his car. He holds the bag over his lap and asks what it contains rather than looking. Will presses a button to change the radio station and answers, "Turkey brie and chutney for you; catfish po' boy for me." Will finds a station playing a scratchy blues song and smiles mischievously. "Unless you'd prefer the po' boy."

Very pointedly, Hannibal does not make a joke about Will being the only poor boy he wants.

"I would not." He keeps his voice airy, playful. It is a sandwich, but at least it is not a burger.

Will's resolve seems to flicker briefly before he schools his features into a very convincing mask of revelry. If Hannibal had not seen the tremor, he would have believed it. He holds the bag in one hand and squeezes Will's knee with the other.

"You have spared me an afternoon of starvation, thank you."

Will chortles at the phrasing of his words and glances down momentarily at Hannibal's hand on his knee. Neither does anything to move away.

"I would hate to see you really hungry." Will jokes lightly but with a solemnity that completely counteracts the mirth and leaves his words sounding dry.

Hannibal thinks about hunger. He thinks about an elegant little tub and a golden bracelet that makes bubbles from soap and water; he thinks about a German song and about a very cold, very horrible winter. Will's hand leaves the steering wheel and rests on top of Hannibal's.

"Are you all right, Hannibal?"

Hannibal swallows and releases Will's knee where his fingers had clamped down tightly and no doubt left behind a bruise. Will parks the car along the sidewalk, and Hannibal stares out the windshield, holding a greasy bag in his hand.

"Hannibal, hey."

Will leans over in his seat and reaches out for Hannibal's face. He holds him by the jaw with his left hand and by the side of his head with his right; Will makes Hannibal look him in the eye. They stare for a few charged seconds before the significance of the action dawns upon Hannibal. It is enough to snap him out of his dreaming. He touches Will's right hand with his left, holding it against his face.

"You left." Will murmurs, shaping his fingers against Hannibal's cheek. Hannibal's vision clouds slightly. He wants to close his eyes, but Will is still watching him, holding his gaze, and so he cannot.

"I am here, Will."

"But you weren't." Will sounds frightened, like this first chink in Hannibal's armor is a great and sublime tragedy to behold.

He slips his hand into Hannibal's hair, closer to the nape where the gel has been applied less liberally and will not appear quite as tousled as if he were to wander two inches higher. Will's fingers are warm, and they leave soothing networks of heat and gentle pressure in the disturbed strands of Hannibal's hair where they fall back into place after his hand passes through.

"What were you thinking about?"

The subtle but potent curiosity in Will's voice catches Hannibal's attention. He sounds almost dazed, as if stricken with the selfsame stupor Hannibal finds himself enveloped in. He looks but cannot tell if Will is doing it on purpose, and that he does not know bothers him.

He leans away from Will, causing Will's hand to drop from his hair and rest at the back of his neck. Will's eyes clear a little bit and his eye brows furrow in concentration and slight confusion. He blinks a few times and takes the bag from Hannibal before quietly exiting the car and walking out onto the grass. Hannibal crosses the street behind him and stops when

Will does at a short stone wall. It is a comfortable enough height that Hannibal only has to bend his knees a little ways before sitting. Druid Hill Park is empty but for a few day joggers and a pair of children playing Frisbee with an adult farther off near a well-built gazebo.

Hannibal shrugs out of his suit jacket and folds it into thirds before setting it down beside him on the wall and unbuttoning his cuffs. Will is distracted watching Hannibal roll his sleeves up to his elbows, and Hannibal allows the spectacle to continue a touch longer than it needs to. He presses a wrinkle smooth with his thumb, his first two fingers poised against the ulnar bone. Will begins to realize what Hannibal is doing and blushes a deep red as he tosses a glare in Hannibal's general direction. Hannibal shrugs, a small smile playing at his lips; an offer of truce extended. Will nods slightly, though he still looks embarrassed. He fumbles with the bag and opens it: the moment of truth.

He removes a neatly wrapped sandwich from the bag and hands it off to Hannibal. The paper wrapped around it is stiff but moistened from the heat. Hannibal is eased by the sight of Will's greasy sandwich as the one Will bought for him is hardly messy at all. He admires Will's sense of foresight and opens the paper at one end to free the sandwich, and the smell of it wafts up around him.

The oven-roasted turkey is clean and holds the faint tang to it that typically tends to cling to poultry when cooked. It is a separate aroma entirely from the vague hint of mushrooms and tree bark that is the melted Brie—not Brie, though, not exactly; an element from it is missing. He detects a faint whiff of dryness and unnatural sterility to the cheese that suggests l'Edel de Cleron rather than Brie, perfectly logical given that true Brie is unavailable in the United States. It is not a tawdry replacement. It pairs excellently with the crisp, grassy mango. Its scent has bled into the motley chutney made from ginger and vinegar. Hannibal takes a bite, and the flavors sing and combine in the exact form and manner he had envisioned that they would.

Will eats his po' boy, and Hannibal wonders if the irony is lost on Will. He decides not to push it in case it has been. He really is famished from missing breakfast.

They use their time together to eat, first and foremost. Will is hungry, too, which makes Hannibal wonder what his business was in Baltimore; if he had been there for any other reason than to bring Hannibal lunch. It is lucky for Will that Mrs. Dufour refused to stop talking the three times Hannibal attempted to show her out. Three times was three times too many, really. He should have just slit her throat, consequences be damned. He could probably make it look like a suicide.

Halfway through his sandwich, Will dabs at his mouth with a napkin and swallows twice before speaking. He says, "I'm sorry about what happened back there."

"I know you meant nothing by it, Will."

"It freaked you out, though, that I did it." Will takes a bite of his sandwich, chews, and swallows. He looks up at the clear blue sky. "That hasn't happened with us since that night."

Will has not been granted access into Hannibal's head space since the morning they found themselves on the dining room floor in a battle so nearly geared toward one or both of their

deaths. Hannibal has been careful not to let Will that close accidentally, and there has been no reason to do it intentionally. Will never asks to be allowed back in, and Hannibal never asks to be let back in. After finding Yusuf Vartanian in that field and probably reconstructing the murder, Will had, in all likelihood, decided not to breach that boundary again unless he couldn't help it. He hadn't been able to stop himself in the car, and neither had Hannibal thought to control the onslaught of memories and emotions that swept over him.

"I was unprepared, just as you were." Hannibal begins, pressing a napkin to the corner of his mouth. "I felt what was coming, and I did not want you to be overtaken by it."

"Were you, overtaken?" Will looks down thoughtfully into the last quarter of his sandwich. He takes a bite and watches the browning Autumn-touched grass instead of watching Hannibal. Hannibal waits until Will has swallowed his mouthful.

"I was perturbed." He admits, not without some discomfort. "At first, I wondered if you might be doing it on purpose."

Will is in between bites, so he has the ability to react without spitting his food everywhere. His eyes are squinting and disbelieving. He sounds affronted when he finds the words he wants.

"You think I would purposely get inside your head like that?" Hannibal watches Will clench his jaw and speak around the bread of his sandwich as he mumbles, "I'm not like you, Hannibal."

He thinks to be annoyed with Will's jab, but he only retorts with: "Aren't you, Will?"

It is only several bites later when Will has finished his sandwich and finally raises his eyes that Hannibal adds, "Aren't we exactly the same?"

Will is quiet. He looks down, takes their trash, and stands to throw it in a trash receptacle several yards east of the wall. Hannibal waits for Will to return and checks his watch. They have ten minutes before Hannibal needs to head back to his practice. Will sits beside Hannibal and bites his lip as he leans his head back to look up at the reddened leaves sparsely decorating the tree branches overhead. Hannibal watches Will's throat and then Will's mouth. He releases his lip and sits straight again. He ducks his chin into his chest, and Hannibal recognizes the telltale signs of a stiff back in the way Will gingerly rolls his shoulders.

Hannibal readjusts himself on the wall so he can reach around Will's back and place his hands upon the scapulae. He presses his thumbs into Will's infraspinatus muscles, drapes his fingers over the clavicle bones, and kneads. Will relaxes in the same instant that Hannibal touches him; he can feel his frame quiver slightly with the rush of tension that leaves his body. He works his fingers into Will's back and squeezes around the ribcage as he makes his way to iliocostalis thoracis and latissimus dorsi, which he digs into with his four fingers.

Will makes a contented little sound and lets his head drop toward one shoulder. Hannibal bends down and leaves a soft kiss on the exposed column of his neck. Will sighs, and Hannibal has a strange feeling of anchorage, of being fixed in this moment of time. He kisses

Will's cheek and smells the rainy, almost nutty aroma of freshly cooked catfish and the twist of lime lingering from the piquant chipotle sauce on his skin.

Will turns his face so his nose brushes Hannibal's temple, and he is beautiful. His fingers are slightly sticky from the poor man's sandwich, and the clothes he wears hide all that his body can do and all that it can evoke when the fear is shed and when the insecurities are stripped away. Will is so heartbreakingly beautiful.

Hannibal doesn't know why, but words crawl up into his larynx and vibrate through the vocal folds. He can't make himself stop. He doesn't want to stop.

"I lost my sister when I was young." His arm slips around behind Will's back and holds him, tightly, as if he will surely float away the second he loosens his grip. Will stiffens just slightly beside him; perhaps he senses the full weight of what Hannibal is telling him, or perhaps he feels the pain itself. "She was only a girl." Hannibal presses his face into Will's shoulder and breathes the familiar scent of his clothes. His fingers clutch at the cheap fabric of Will's shirt, and Will turns, slowly, slowly into Hannibal's side to wrap his arms around him.

"I'm sorry." He whispers.

Hannibal hears a chord in Will's voice very unlike sympathy; unlike sorrow and unlike pity. He hears instead a hollow, melancholic dissonance; the turbulent clanging of a suppressed rage. He hears himself as a young man reciting the names inscribed on the dog tags of the six men who forever changed his life; he hears those same men singing Ein Männlein Steht Im Walde as they take his sister away from him, laughing as they go.

"Her name was Mischa."

It has been many years since he said the name out loud; even more since he last screamed it in his sleep. It sends a shiver coursing through his body.

Hannibal pulls away from the warm crook of Will's clavicle and feels droplets clinging to his eye lashes. He closes his eyes and takes the pads of his fingers across his right eye, freezing when he feels Will's breath on his face. He starts at the touch of Will's tongue on his cheek and opens his eyes. Will's eyes are half closed. He watches Hannibal watching him and nestles his face into Hannibal's hair.

"Big brother Hannibal." Will says softly. "I never would have guessed."

"Not many people do." Hannibal pulls back, and his right hand has woven its way into Will's. He doesn't remember if he did it or if Will did.

"Let's have dinner tonight." Will suggests, only brightening in his eyes. "I think there's still some liver in the freezer."

There is, of course, a much wider selection available to them than just the liver. Hannibal smiles and leans in to steal a kiss off Will's nervous, well-meaning lips. Will smiles, and the faint tremor in his bottom lip desists.

Hannibal stands, and Will stands, too. Their hands remain interlocked as they traverse the grass together and make for the car.

Will stops at the driver's side door and tightens his grip around Hannibal's fingers when Hannibal attempts to detach their hands. He watches Will look upon him and marvels, internally, at the total lack of anxiety in Will's expression. His eyes are clear with strong intent. He licks his lips.

"You killed them, didn't you?"

Hannibal doesn't bother to ask how Will knew to ask that exact question. It doesn't matter, and anyway, he thinks he knows the answer. Will grows quickly annoyed with him when he asks needless questions.

"Yes."

Will swallows, nods, and brings Hannibal in for a surprisingly deep but gentle kiss. He licks a little at Hannibal's lips but makes no real attempt to breach his mouth. Hannibal pulls Will's body closer to his with one arm; the other remains at his side lined up with Will's. They don't release each other's hands until Hannibal breaks the kiss and Will turns to open the car door.

They drive back to the practice, and Hannibal is fifteen minutes late. He cares not a wink about it. He kisses Will in the parking lot and hurries in, feigning a shortness of breath and apologetic chagrin for his patient. The hour passes quickly, and Hannibal mostly wonders about what he should make for his and Will's dinner tonight.

His remaining sessions pass, and Hannibal decides by the end of the work day what items he will need to pick up from the market. He sees his final patient, Mr. Voclain, out the patients' exit and tidies up his office a moment before taking up his coat and keys. There is a small scuff on the wooden floor from the elk statuette where he dropped it after killing Tobias Budge. He sinks to a crouch and runs his finger along the slight indentation and remembers the violence and agility of their fight. He remembers Jack's suspicion and remembers the reassuring smile on Will's face after he said the words, *"I was worried you were dead."*

A test passed, for both of them; a trial cleared.

Hannibal drives to the market and notices on his way in that Rose of Sharon is not at any one of the eight registers. He navigates through the store quickly and efficiently with his basket.

They will have Tampico liver with vegetables on the side and berry cobbler afterwards; the ingredients he needs are neatly organized in his mind. He fills his basket first of fresh vegetables: green beans, sugar snap peas, tomatoes, green olives, and a single jalapeño chili. Standing before the strawberry bin Hannibal remembers Will holding the basket like an awkward teenager holding a corsage out to his prom date. He had been so focused on Hannibal and their shopping that he had been unaware, for once, of the prying eyes of others.

There are few things more domestic in appearance than the simple act of grocery shopping. Hannibal often earns curious looks from others for doing his own shopping. People think, perhaps, that his wardrobe and dignified air speak to a personality of a higher status than

would be caught dead cooking in a kitchen. And then there was Will, standing at his side looking every bit as out of place as Hannibal, though for different reasons.

Will, of course, is a handsome man; Hannibal knows himself, likewise, to be potentially attractive to others. He thinks they make a good pair, much like matured Kilikanoon Mort's Block Riesling wine and creamy Roquefort cheese: each of them characterized individually by an acute intricacy of flavor but further complicated and intensified when brought together.

From the herb aisle, he picks up some mint and takes a detour to the baking section for powdered sugar. He turns for the check-out but stops when he hears a voice trickle over the soft whistling of shopping carts and other patrons' subdued conversations. Curious, he spins on his heels and strides over to the end of the aisle and catches sight of a familiar red ponytail. Guillaume is speaking to her as he shaves the fat off a julienned strip of raw meat. He looks up at Rose of Sharon, and she laughs; he has told her a joke. He catches Hannibal's eye and waves. Hannibal nods in turn.

Rose of Sharon turns and sees him, and when she turns he can see that her uniform has changed. Her coral dress shirt tucks into her black pleated pants, and the green apron has been discarded. She smiles and says something over her shoulder to Guillaume before practically skipping to greet Hannibal.

"Good afternoon, sir. May I help you with anything?" She asks, mouth smiling and vivid green eyes shining. He allows himself to smile back.

"I have everything I need." Hannibal shakes his head and indicates his basket with a lift of his arm. He feels the sentiment much deeper than the trivial fact of the groceries. Will is his, he will cook dinner for him tonight, and Rose of Sharon has the job she deserves. She beams, quite attractively, and Hannibal notices she is wearing rouge on her cheeks and lips. It makes her look almost five years older, in a way that only boosts the appeal she always secretly possessed.

"You know, me, too." She nods and steps around his side so they can walk together. They pass the deli, and the warm aroma of leavened bread softens everything she says. "That man they found in the cornfield, did you hear about that on the news?"

Hannibal nods and pretends to eye the fresh baguettes. A tall man with flour smattering the ends of his shirt proudly stocks the wooden shelves with plastic-wrapped focaccia.

"Mr. Vartanian used to be the GM here—oh, that's General Manager." She continues at Hannibal's nod. "God rest him, but..." She pockets her hands, and Hannibal abandons the baguettes. "He wasn't the best boss in the world; he could be mean to the customers sometimes, and meaner to us."

They pause again at the produce section, and Hannibal examines the ripened pears before moving onto the oranges.

"Gloria will do a better job than he did, and me, well…" She sighs, and the blush returns to her face.

“You will be a spectacular leader.” Hannibal says, switching his basket to his other arm. It catches her eye.

“I never got your name.” Rose of Sharon brushes a strand of hair behind her ear, and Hannibal remembers the first time they spoke; remembers her mildly flirtatious handling of him.

“Dr. Hannibal Lecter.”

“A doctor.” She chuckles and shakes his hand. “I assume you’ve got a woman at home then.” Her words are only slightly hopeful.

“Not a woman.” He continues when her face brightens considerably. “His name is Will.”

She immediately looks embarrassed.

“Oh! Oh, I’m sorry.” She chuckles, beet red in the face. The color rivals her hair. “Really, I didn’t know.”

“He was with me the last time I was here.” He says helpfully, though he is unobligated to tell her more. She thinks, and the full force of the memory dawns on her.

“With the glasses?”

“Yes.” Hannibal eyes a blood orange and inspired, picks two for his basket.

“Somehow that makes a lot of sense.” She smiles. Something catches her eye behind Hannibal, and she swiftly excuses herself. “You and Will have a wonderful dinner, Dr. Lecter.” He nods his thanks and watches her walk hurriedly but gracefully to the splattered tub of sour cream in the dairy section.

She waves to someone Hannibal can’t see and bends down to speak to the child who dropped the item. The little boy points back toward Guillaume’s station and in a matter of moments, a woman comes running to collect her child. Rose of Sharon smiles and helps a teenaged employee with the ruined plastic tub so he can mop the mess up. Hannibal is quite pleased with his handiwork.

Sparing a glance to the oranges in his basket, he slips again into the baking aisle to find a bottle of orange flower water. He trades it out for the powdered sugar in his basket, mind made up. He proceeds at last to the check-out and purchases his groceries. The cashier is a slightly less able-minded man with crooked teeth and greasy hair. He rings Hannibal up, and Hannibal leaves. They do not share words.

Upon his arrival home, he carries the groceries in and hangs up his coat in the foyer. He sheds the items from his day in the professional world upstairs and leaves his suit jacket in the bedroom. He descends the stairs to the cellar and takes out the helping of liver Will mentioned. Ordinarily, it would take a few hours to thaw, but the process will be much more condensed if he cooks it frozen, so he resolves to do just that. In the meantime, he will prepare the rest of their dinner.

He sets the liver in a pan and covers the meat as it cooks over a low heat. He checks his watch: a quarter to seven.

Careful not to let the liver cook too long before flipping and slicing the heated layers as they are turned every five minutes, he washes his hands and starts in with the oranges after removing the apron from a drawer and tying it behind his back.

He rinses the zesty peel of one orange in the sink and slices it with a sharp paring knife so the top and bottom are removed. He then flays the rind from the soft body of the fruit and dislodges the pith from the core with an easy twist between his thumb and forefinger. He repeats these actions with the second orange and opens the bottle of orange flower water to sprinkle some into a bowl. He sets the thick orange slices into the bowl and adds more orange flower water to accommodate for the second layer.

He covers the bowl and sets it aside, checking his watch as he does. He flips the meat and slices another cooked layer from the top. He places it gently onto a plate beside the stovetop and presses small slits into the membrane as it cooks over the fire.

He has some time in between turning the meat again in the pan, so he sets the table in the dining room and fishes out a bottle of Bollinger Grande Annee Brut Rosé from the cellar. It will pair well with the liver. He chills the wine in the ice bucket on the kitchen island and turns and slices the liver in the pan.

Will calls him as he is chopping an onion to be sautéed beside the defrosting liver. He asks if he should head over soon. Hannibal says yes, and they talk briefly as Will fusses with something on the other line. Hannibal thinks he might be tying his shoes or something equally tedious.

“What are you making?” Will asks, shuffling about in his room in Wolf Trap, Virginia, an hour away. Will was quite wrong when he suggested that Hannibal would prefer the distance. In truth, he does not. The oddly comforting feeling he gets from listening to Will move about in his home evidences that fact, as strange a concept as it is. Hannibal is unused to attachment of the sort he’s developed with Will. It’s elastic yet unbending; fluid yet unchangeable in its most fundamental components. It is floating, and it is sinking.

“Tampico liver with vegetables.”

“And after?”

“A Moroccan orange dessert.”

He listens as Will knocks something over and curses under his breath. The sound brings a smile to his face. Will is clumsy when he feels as though he’s being put on the spot. Hannibal’s silence has him feeling jittery tonight; their exchange in Druid Hill Park today is still a heavy weight on Will’s mind.

Hannibal grants Will with the gift of his mercy and asks him a question that has been with him since Will showed up that afternoon with lunch for them both.

“What were you doing in Baltimore today, Will?”

Will makes an accidental sound, a too loud intake of breath. He stumbles over his words. Hannibal turns the meat and salts the caramelized onions in the skillet.

“Bringing you lunch.” Will answers, a slight defensive tone in his voice.

“You nearly missed me. I only thought you might have been in town beforehand. Did Jack Crawford have you interrogating witnesses?” He almost hears Will rolling his eyes.

“It’s nothing to do with work. I’m just—I’ve been doing something.” Will huffs, knowing his answer is lacking.

Hannibal chuckles softly.

“Keeping secrets, Will?”

“Not a secret.” He says with a spark of indignation. “It’s a surprise.” He hedges, sounding embarrassed.

“For me?” Hannibal shuts off the fire beneath the defrosted liver and adds garlic cloves to the caramelized onions in the skillet. He hears the front door to Will’s home swing shut and the light sounds of Will’s footfalls down the front porch. They soften as he touches onto the soft earth, but Hannibal listens and can hear the leaves crinkling beneath his shoes.

“Yes, for you.” Will opens his car door. “Honestly, Hannibal.”

Hannibal licks his lips, feels the telling curve of a smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. The car door slams closed, and the engine turns over.

“I’m gonna hit the road now. I’ll see you in a bit.”

“Drive safely, Will.” Hannibal says instead of goodbye.

Will laughs and disconnects the call. Hannibal turns back to the busy stovetop and allocates the covered liver to an oven mitt on the kitchen island. He boils the pound of green beans he bought and fries up some of the bacon he had in the refrigerator. It is the last cut of Yusuf Vartanian’s belly. It served its purpose well.

He places the green beans into a pan to sauté them with the fat from the bacon and dices the cooked bacon before adding it to the pan. He pours the completed side dish into a large bowl and sets it in the oven to keep warm.

He chops up the lonely jalapeño pepper and tosses it as well as diced tomatoes, olives, and vinegar in with the garlic and onions. When the mixture comes to a boil, he pours in chicken broth and leaves the mixture to simmer for ten minutes. He washes some of the pans he has freed up in the meantime. The pans washed and dried, he adds a tablespoon of butter into the skillet with the simmering onions. It breaks down at the suggestion of heat, and Hannibal removes the pan from the fire.

Everything cooked fairly quickly tonight. All he has left are the liver and the snap peas, and they will take only a few minutes. He brings some olive oil to a slight rippling boil in another saucepan and adds the snap peas. He leaves them covered over the stove before bringing the remaining ingredients into the mix as he will need to serve it immediately after it has cooked through. He stands in his kitchen and pours himself a glass of wine, taking down another for Will.

The oranges have macerated in the orange flower water for an hour when he moves them to two plates and leaves them to chill in the refrigerator. Hannibal sips his wine and eyes his empty sink. The cluttered pans with food sit and wait on the stovetop for further instruction.

Hannibal starts a low heat beneath the onions again to keep them warm while he waits on Will to show. He removes the apron and steps out of the kitchen to retrieve a book from his library and leans against the kitchen island as he reads. Will arrives much later, knocking on the door before letting himself in. He comes directly into the kitchen, and Hannibal sets the book down, offering Will his best smile. There is no immediate reason for it. Will seems just as surprised by it as Hannibal is, but neither comment on it.

“What are you reading?” Will asks after clearing his throat. He dropped his coat off in the foyer, and he’s wearing a plain pale blue shirt. His hair has a bounce to it that suggests he showered right before he called Hannibal.

“Jung’s *Dreams*.” Hannibal pushes the book on the kitchen island with his first two fingers so it lines up evenly with the edge of the granite counter top. “He and many like him considered the hart to be a psychopomp. Are you familiar with the term, Will?”

Will rounds the kitchen island and stands beside Hannibal to eye the book. Hannibal pours Will a glass of the Rosé.

“Isn’t the Grim Reaper a psychopomp?”

“Yes, a guide to the afterlife.”

“Human hearts or…?”

“A stag, Will. They were called harts in medieval times; it was the term given to the beast’s fully matured state.” Hannibal turns as he speaks to the stovetop. He brings the snap peas back to a high heat and stirs in green onions and a pinch of sugar to the drooped green vegetables.

“Does that make us guides to the afterlife?” Will asks slowly, approaching Hannibal from behind as he heats olive oil in a clean pan.

“A psychopomp acts more as a shepherd than as the hand of God, if you were wondering at the symbolism of your dream.” Hannibal says facing the stove. He cooks the liver over the fire and stirs the sauce of onions and garlic. Will’s hands land on Hannibal’s hips without warning and his chin drops to Hannibal’s shoulder. “The mythology behind the wendigo gives further insight, though the theory of the psychopomp is not without its defendable points.”

Hannibal angles his head as he speaks to Will, and Will turns so his hair brushes against Hannibal's. His breath washes over Hannibal's ear as he replies, voice soft: "What's the mythology behind the wendigo?"

"Algonquian legend holds that a man will become a monster after the prolonged consumption of human flesh." He turns to look at Will, and they hold each other's eyes. "This monster is often depicted with the antlers of a stag and with rotting flesh covering the length of its body; it is an ancient precautionary tale."

"Against cannibalism."

"Against cannibalism, Will."

"Furry lepers." Will scrunches his nose. "That's the best they could come up with?"

"Does the thought not deter you?"

Will swallows around his reply and reconsiders his words before speaking. He takes a breath.

"People don't need to look like monsters to become them."

Hannibal spoons the cooked liver into the pan with the onions and stirs it together. He sets the wooden spoon down in the emptied pan to the right and allows the spicy onion and garlic sauce to sluice in with the liver.

"They do not, no."

"How did your sister die, Hannibal?"

He twists the notches on the stove to shut the fire off. Briefly, very briefly, he considers bashing Will over the head with the still-hot pan. He takes a breath, thinks about Will's front curled around his back; the warmth from his body is an unbroken current of vibrating electricity.

"Do you ask because you think I killed her, Will?"

Will's hands travel from Hannibal's hips to his stomach, causing his arms to encircle Hannibal's waist completely. Hannibal drops his hands to Will's wrists and thumbs the skin just exposed from beneath his sleeve. Women usually knew not to hold him like this, and the few men he had been with before Will were not the type to crowd him so much as they were the type to be crowded. Will had been that type of man in the past but seemed strangely comfortable with reversing their established roles.

"No." Will breathes against Hannibal's neck, fearless and far from his nerves.

"We lived in Lithuania." Hannibal begins without inflection. "The country was under Soviet rule and on the Eastern Bloc of the Berlin Wall. My family had moved us to a hunting lodge my parents kept in the woods for the winter to avoid unrest in the streets. Ironically, it was a plane crash that killed them; probably skyjacked. Mischa and I…" He pauses. "We were safe in the cabin. She was two years old. I was a boy of six.

“We were far from help and in the middle of the woods.” Hannibal continues. “Men found us, six of them. They had attempted, and failed, to defect. One of them was too wounded to travel, so they took the house.”

Hannibal grits his teeth and twists the pan of liver and onions by the handle. There is just enough for both he and Will to eat alongside the other two dishes and the Moroccan orange dessert. He twists the filled pan away from him and then twists it the other way. It is a tiny bathtub; it is a dirty bucket for meat and grime and spit and blood. The yellowed pearls of garlic cloves are Mischa’s milking teeth floating in a stew the color of sewage.

He pulls out of Will’s hold and takes the empty pan he used to cook the liver to the sink and washes it. Will says something behind him that he doesn’t hear.

“It snowed that year.” Hannibal runs the water and scrubs at the pan. He speaks over his scrubbing, over the water. “The wounded man, Grutas, he was better in a few weeks, but by then we had run out of food, and he was certain if they went into town they would be recognized and be imprisoned for their crimes.” Hannibal rinses the pan and then scrubs it again.

“Hannibal…” Will is saying something else. Hannibal shakes his head.

“Whatever meat they found in the woods froze through before they could get to it.” A sharp pain stings at the center of his Humerus, a door slamming on his arm. He remembers the exact force of it when it cracked the bone in his six year-old body in half as he clutched after his sister for the last time. He drops the pan in the sink. The soap is bloody on his hands.

“Hannibal, that’s enough. You don’t have to tell me the rest.” Will says with a harsh undercurrent of agony that Hannibal feels deep inside his chest. He grips the edge of the counter and swallows hard. Will does not approach him this time. He knows his touch will not be welcome.

Hannibal examines his hands, and the soap is only soap again. He rinses them under the water, and they are clean, capable, exacting.

“She contracted pneumonia. They decided she would die soon anyway.”

The temperature in the room drops. He feels as if the gravity has been sucked out as well and like all his insides are clambering inside of him untethered, unsupervised. Will takes a step behind him. He can’t tell whether it is a step closer or a step back.

“They ate her, Will.” Hannibal blinks down at the pan in the sink. He rinses it, dries it, and places it in its rightful cupboard. He stands straight and dries his hands. “They fed her to me in a broth.”

A long silence passes before he turns to look upon Will. He is watching Hannibal with wide eyes. There is horror in those eyes, an unspeakable fear not for himself but for Hannibal. Will can feel the rifts in his tranquil demeanor. He can feel that they are only just the beginning of Hannibal’s pain, the very tip of the iceberg. He takes a cautious step forward and then another, more boldly. Will continues until he is right up against Hannibal’s body.

He holds Hannibal's face in his hands and takes a deep breath. There are tears in his eyes; Hannibal can see them clearly formed and ready to spill over. Will's lip quivers just so when he opens his mouth to speak.

"Let me." He whispers.

"Let you what, Will?" Hannibal doesn't recognize his own voice; a throaty croak. He cannot hide his surprise. Will is a reservoir and a dam just like Hannibal is a reservoir and a dam, and the foundations holding the two bodies of consciousness separate from one another rattle with sweet, vicious promise.

"Let me in." Will gasps and takes a kiss from Hannibal's lips. He takes another and presses their foreheads together. "Let me see."

A tear explodes on Hannibal's cheek. He thinks it is Will's, but there is no way to know for sure. He is trembling in his skin; they both are. Hannibal reaches out for Will's shoulders and forces his body to relax, even as his mind and his heart race. He has not entirely made his decision about whether to do this when the words begin to fall freely from his mouth. He murmurs against Will's lips, "I loved her more than anything in this world."

Will's fingernails bite into the skin at the back of Hannibal's neck. He gulps a mouthful of air and mumbles under his breath, "I loved her more than…"

"I could do nothing to save her."

"Nothing to save…" Will's body grows rigid. He holds onto Hannibal tightly, and staggered by his display of emotion, winded because it is his own emotion burning inside Will's heart, Hannibal's legs fall out from under him, and Will goes tumbling with him. They lie on the floor, and Will's frame is shaking as if with cold—probably with the cold, Hannibal revises, of a Lithuanian winter.

Will holds Hannibal's shirt in his fingers. His cheeks are stained with tears, but his face is a mask of barely caged fury.

"Tell me they begged for their lives." Will whispers. His voice is just as wrecked as Hannibal's is.

He makes no effort to school his voice either. He says, "With their last breaths."

Will sighs, and his hips roll against Hannibal's, sexual and purposeful. Hannibal can't tell if it is a physical fever spurning him on or if it is out of a need for intimacy that Will's body moves so wantonly against his. Hannibal pulls Will closer and tries it for himself. He presses his groin against Will's and groans.

He decides it doesn't matter where the drive came from. He tears Will's shirt from his body and crushes their lips together. Will makes a high-pitched sound in the back of his throat and leaps to his feet. Hannibal thinks to yank him back down, but then Will is pulling him up by both hands and leading him around the kitchen island. He rifles through a drawer while Hannibal busies himself with unbuckling Will's belt. Will turns and hops up onto the counter.

He presses lubricant in Hannibal's hand and shoves his pants down. They get stuck around his shoes.

Hannibal chooses to ignore the several faux pas at play and slicks his fingers with the stuff. He pushes into Will in one motion with his forefinger and doesn't stop until his knuckle is buried. Will groans and his feet scuff against Hannibal's thighs where he is attempting to toe off his shoes. One drops to the floor by the time Hannibal adds his second finger. He doesn't bother with a third. Will tells him every time that two are enough; the lubricant will ease whatever tightness Will's body hangs onto when Hannibal's fingers leave him.

He takes pity on Will and yanks off his second shoe and rips the pants off his body in one fell swoop. He spreads Will's legs wide and takes himself out of his pants. He thinks to use a condom, but Will only gave him lubricant. He takes that as a silent request not to use one and coats his cock with a generous amount of the clear liquid, more than he typically uses.

He wipes his hand on a nearby dish towel and flings the dirtied thing to the floor. He sinks down on top of Will and nudges his way inside of him. Will writhes beneath him; the first few seconds of entry are the most exhilarating for Will; they are the most painful.

Hannibal wastes no time in beginning to move once Will acclimates to the feeling. It doesn't take him so long anymore. They set a steadily quickening pace together. Hannibal watches Will watching his body as he recedes and then smacks into the backs of Will's thighs. He clutches at Hannibal's vest, a particular recurrence with Will whenever Hannibal takes him while still wearing most if not all of his clothes. Will's body slides back and forth on the counter top with every push of Hannibal's weight against him. He makes breathy little noises and holds onto Hannibal's shirtfront, wrenches the back of Hannibal's collar in the other as their bodies knock together more forcefully.

Will throws his head back and releases a gorgeous, low moan that holds sweetness and passion and love within it.

And love.

Hannibal's hips slow, and Will hums his confusion through his parted lips.

And love, and love, and love.

More than anything in this world.

Will is watching him curiously through half-lidded eyes. He circles his hips beneath Hannibal, a sensuous coax. Hannibal leans over on top of Will completely so he can do nothing further to goad Hannibal on. Will bites his lip and searches Hannibal's eyes.

Hannibal brushes the hair out of Will's eyes and kisses his forehead. He lingers there with his lips on Will's sweat-slicked skin. Will shivers and snakes his arms around Hannibal's back. He pulls Hannibal's body down into his with his legs, and Hannibal shivers, too. He takes Will's hip with one hand and holds himself up with the other by planting it next to Will's head on the black granite. He rolls his hips into Will's, slowly, and they breathe and moan into each other's mouths.

His hips go no faster than that, and Will does nothing to try and make him resume their earlier pace. He keeps the tempo with Hannibal, and their bodies graze and burn everywhere. He kisses Will at any and all patches of skin that become available to him: the shell of Will's ear, his neck, his clavicle, his throat. His fingers clamp down on Will's hip, and Will comes with a silent shudder. His whole body quakes beneath Hannibal's.

He twitches and groans beneath Hannibal's prolonged assault to his body, but he does not protest. Hannibal finds Will's ear again with his lips. He says, "Tell me you're mine, Will."

Will looks at Hannibal, and he does not miss a single beat. He says, "Yours, Hannibal."

And Hannibal comes inside of Will as quietly as Will did. Will brushes his fingers through his hair until the roar of his blood in his ears dies down and until his body stops pulsating with his spent pleasure. He stays buried within Will's body and runs his hands up the flesh of Will's bare stomach. His hand finds Will's hair, and they kiss for a long time before Will turns his face just enough to break away and lets his head fall back onto the counter top. Hannibal stares down into Will's eyes, and this time, he is the one searching. Will seems to know something he doesn't.

"Will…"

The beautiful sated man beneath him smiles a wide, lazy smile and shakes his head. He says, "Come here."

Hannibal does. He stays wrapped up in Will's body and pushes the thoughts of cleaning up this mess to the back of his mind. He will exist in this moment for as long as he can.

He buries his face in Will's neck and breathes him in, and while the still-fevered rush of his blood beneath his skin smells very little like the house Hannibal lives in, it is home; a home made of red and white blood cells and axons and dendrites. Will is his home. He closes his eyes and breathes in that scent. A million miles away but at the innermost core of his being also, Hannibal hears Will laughing softly, feels the low rumble of it through their chests as if it is a sound that comes from both of them.

Hannibal laughs, too. Laughter is contagious, after all.

Chapter End Notes

The Rad Sandwiches (Not People)
http://www.goldenwestcafe.com/menu/lunch-dinner/sandwiches/

The Complex Cheese that Isn't Actually Brie
http://www.cheeseisalive.com/2009/05/brie.html

Homemade Mango Chutney
http://www.simplyrecipes.com/recipes/homemade_mango_chutney/

Tampico (Calves') Liver
http://www.foodnetwork.com/recipes/tampico-calves-liver-recipe/index.html

Green Beans w/ Bacon
http://www.simplyrecipes.com/recipes/green_beans_with_bacon/

Seared Sugar Snap Peas
http://www.simplyrecipes.com/recipes/seared_sugar_snap_peas/

Moroccan Orange Dessert
http://www.simplyrecipes.com/recipes/moroccan_orange_dessert/

Bollinger Grande Annee Brut Rosé 2002
http://www.wine.com/V6/Bollinger-Grande-Annee-Brut-Rose-2002/wine/107146/detail.aspx

--
The Golden West and the Zen Café are totes real places that I don't own, and their awesome-sauce food isn't mine either.

There are continuity issues with Harris' aging of Hannibal when his sister died (six years old in *Hannibal* and eight years in *Hannibal Rising*). I've chosen to make him six here because writerly reasons (I had to pick one or the other). And everyone should know that this is not the canonical way Hannibal loses his sister (because it couldn't be, logistically). Suspend your imagination with me.

And also, you should always use condoms when you have sex. Srsly, respect and protect yourselves. <3

Waiting For The Sun

Chapter Summary

Trouble in paradise.

Chapter Notes

Waiting for you to come along/Waiting for you to tell me what went wrong/This is the strangest life I've ever known

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will shouldn't be able to tell just by looking. Even if that is what he does for a living, he shouldn't be able to tell. It's all there, though, practically gift-wrapped.

The wondering air of bewilderment, the blatant disregard for the cooled food on the stove, the steady inhales and exhales tickling Will's neck where Hannibal scents him again and again like his waning fever is a perfume or an intoxicating narcotic; he is distracted, entirely, with Will. Distraction isn't even the half of it. Distraction doesn't scrape the surface of Hannibal's frame of mind here in Will's arms.

Hannibal loves him.

Will knows, and knowing makes him feel countless intense, problematic things. Everything he knows about Hannibal is like that. It's hardly anything new; hardly, except this time Hannibal loves him.

He loves Will.

He *made love* to Will, and they're…Well, it's hardly a good location for it, but they're cuddling.

They've held onto each other following sex before, but it's never felt like this; it's never felt so binding. Will has never been able to really let go with anyone. He'd gotten close with Hannibal several times now, but his carefree ease had always been prompted by the visceral, nearly debilitating flood of dopamine to his brain. This is nothing like those times. Where they had fucked quickly and relentlessly in the past, this time they had gone slowly; they had isolated the variables that constituted sex to just the barest friction of movement between their connected bodies and allowed for a passion deeper than their skin to rule them.

A hunger much greater than just their appetite for each other's flesh had overridden Will's empathy and domineered Hannibal's control. It lives in the spaces between Will's bones, in the seams of his muscles. It breathes and sparks inside him more dangerously than the fire that previously dwelt there. The phantom masses are cancerous; they spread and mutate and possess. They consume and are consumed in an unending cycle. They are restorative, preternatural, and grotesque like the stag's antlers; they *are* the stag's antlers.

All along, they had called it fire, but it isn't fire. It isn't darkness, isn't union. It's metamorphosis.

Will wonders if Hannibal knows it yet; if he knows how drastically things have changed or if Will is the only one who feels it. He chokes on a tiny moan when Hannibal finally pulls out of him. Hannibal huffs a tiny sigh, tucks himself back into his pants, and lifts his face from Will's neck where he had been breathing Will in.

Something in Hannibal's face is different. It is neither good nor bad; more than anything, he looks confused. He doesn't know what's happened, or if he does, he doesn't understand it.

Yet, Will thinks. He doesn't understand it *yet.*

"We should eat." Hannibal says. Although his voice is firm and his eyes are steady on Will's, the statement sounds something like a question. Hannibal looks as if he's checked out, even as his fingers unconsciously brush Will's side in a gesture very nearly resembling…

Is he nervous?

The slight haze in Hannibal's eyes tapers off in the same instant that Will realizes it's there to begin with. Hannibal pushes up on his hands until he is standing upright. His trademark elegance is wrecked. His easy poise is wilted. He looks like a treasure-trove after a violent ransacking; like the scraps left of a city in the aftermath of a hurricane.

Will has looted his grace. Will has demolished his walls.

Will did this to him, and he doesn't even know how. Hannibal doesn't know either, and it frightens him not knowing.

It frightens him.

"Yes, we should eat." Hannibal says quietly. He clears his throat and walks to the stove to warm the food again, buttoning the top three buttons of his vest Will managed to undo before his fingers began to fail him. After a certain point, holding on had seemed more worthwhile to Will than disrobing. How ironic that in doing so, he had disrobed more of Hannibal than he imagined was even possible. He'd picked him clean the way a condor frees a fetid skeleton of carrion.

Will sits up shakily and hops off the counter. He picks up the dish towel Hannibal wiped his hands on and scrubs the semen off his stomach. He folds it and repeats the action with the backs of his legs and the uncomfortably sodden orifice at his backside. He pulls on his pants

and bides his time tying his shoes. He has to pass Hannibal to retrieve his shirt, and they don't speak or look at each other when he does.

Will bends down to pick it up and feels sore in a way that has nothing to do with his physical body. He shrugs the sleeves onto his shoulders and stops before he buttons the shirt up. He won't be the one to shy away from the truth this time.

Hannibal scrapes loudly at the pan behind him. Emboldened, if not just because he hasn't turned to face Hannibal yet, Will asks, "What about this scares you?"

There is a slight pause in Hannibal's scraping. The resumed sound pings around Will's insides like a rubber ball lost to velocity and to its own physical properties. Hannibal picks up, mechanically, as if there were no pause at all.

He says, "Fear is a gauge, Will. Like pain, it indicates the vitality and the risk present in our lives."

Will remembers pain. He remembers fear, too, of himself and of Hannibal.

He remembers standing in the very same spot he stands in now; he remembers confronting Hannibal and wishing with every cell in his body that he could be wrong about this horrible, monstrous, beautiful, endlessly beautiful, man. Hannibal won't look at him, and Will finds himself wishing again that he could be wrong, but he knows he isn't. He knows he can't be anymore. The thing he felt, the thing greater and far more wrathful and lethal than any fire, came from Hannibal. Of course it did.

Hannibal won't say how much it affects him to feel it and not because he assumes Will knows already. He'll keep it to himself because he thinks Will doesn't know, thinks Will won't pick up on it or that he won't react positively if he does. Will wonders what he'll have to do for Hannibal to expect more of him. He has an idea of something that would do the trick. It sets his heart pounding in his chest, though there are other factors at work forcing his body to react.

"You're supposed to be my gauge." Will hears himself say.

Hannibal does turn at that. He abandons the food still heating up over the fire on the stove. There's a lie waiting in his eyes; Will sees it as clearly as he sees the frown weighing heavily on the edges of Hannibal's mouth.

He braces for impact. The calm that precedes a storm, Hannibal's calm and Will's shelter, diffuses.

"Do I make you feel alive, Will?" Hannibal's voice is controlled to the last consonant. There is a mocking edge in it that drives a deep stab of something toxic and jagged into Will's chest. His heart clenches around it and shocks his blood with a chill. The spike in his pulse causes his lungs to pull more desperately at the oxygen in the room. His body thinks he's drowning.

He swallows down the lump in his throat and forces himself not to move from his spot. He imagines his feet as roots and his body as a tree; he imagines himself as the oak in the backyard, unhindered and disabused.

“The absence of fear makes me feel alive, Dr. Lecter.” Will says, choosing his words carefully. He notes with a shiver how the room begins to steadily close in on him as soon as the formal address leaves his lips. Hannibal’s shoulders shift beneath his shirt just enough that Will notices. He is a wild animal ready to lunge.

Will makes the mistake of taking a step back to put the kitchen island between them. The look on Hannibal’s face instantly turns murderous.

“Or maybe you never knew fear before you met me, Will.”

He takes one step forward, and only the corner of the counter separates them. Hannibal could reach Will with his hands from where he stands, but they are pointedly tucked away in his pockets.

“You’d like to believe that, wouldn’t you?” Will asks softly, the terror burbling in his bones subsiding a little with his disbelief. A fuzzy anger replaces it when the truth hits him. “You want to be the one that ruins me.” He scoffs and rounds the corner, disregarding how big of a blunder it could turn out to be. The movement starts a wild whirring within him, and he can’t stop what comes out of his mouth next. “You don’t love anyone. You can’t.”

Hannibal’s mask falls. The rage in his slightly widened eyes shatters.

Something in the pan behind Hannibal sizzles. The food is burning, and Hannibal does nothing to stop it.

“Perhaps you are right, Will.”

“Perhaps I’m right.” Will repeats disdainfully. His hands begin to shake. “That’s it? Perhaps I’m right?”

Hannibal turns away and shuts the fire off again. He scrapes the meat and onions into the trash. He did this their first morning together when he thought Will was shying away from him; when Will shied away from what he was. Hannibal thinks that’s what’s happening now. Addicting fool that he is, he thinks Will still means to run from him at the first given opportunity; all along he had expected Will to turn on him.

“We are compatible, Will.” Hannibal murmurs, dropping the pan into the sink so it clatters loudly. The sound makes Will flinch. “I thought by now you would have seen that.”

There is something ruinous and heartbroken in the way Hannibal says the word *compatible*. Will can feel his trepidation, his dread, and his anger. Frustration and impatience replace Hannibal’s calm, and because he is so attuned to Hannibal’s emotional output, it strikes Will like a blow to the back of the head.

“Why would you keep this up if you thought I hadn’t?” Will asks softly. It’s risky to touch Hannibal now, but Hannibal is the embodiment of risk. Hannibal is fear, and Hannibal is pain, and Will touches him expecting nothing less.

Somehow, though, he doesn’t expect it to hurt quite as much when Hannibal shrugs his hand off his shoulder. Hannibal takes the pan to the sink to wash it; his knuckles are white around the handle.

“How much do you truly believe that, I wonder?”

“What are you asking me to do, Hannibal?” Will asks, desperate for this conflict to subside.

“I only ask you to see what this is, for all that it is, Will. I believe I deserve that much.”

Hannibal scrubs at the pan, splashing some water onto the floor with the exaggerated movements of his hand.

“What *is* this?” Will asks, humbled and awed by Hannibal’s obvious state of unrest. “What are we?”

“You have asked me that question once before.”

Will remembers sitting in the parking lot outside the Peter-Herdic House. He remembers their conversation; Hannibal’s courtship, Will’s confession.

“You let me in. No one else ever did that before.”

“You said I was worthy of the chase.”

“I thought you were.” Hannibal says it like a man who’s changed his mind. He says it like he’s realized a fatal flaw in all his meticulous planning and has decided to abandon ship. Hannibal dries the pan and tucks it into a cupboard. He places his hands on the edge of the counter top, and his shoulders hunch slightly forward.

“Are you breaking up with me?” Will asks, incredulity heavy on his words.

Hannibal doesn’t turn to look at him. Will considers their respective positions. He could strike Hannibal; he could kill him. He’d be doing the world a favor. He can’t even be surprised at himself for how easy it would be. He liked killing Garrett Jacob Hobbs, and the man had done nothing to hurt him. Here Hannibal was threatening to destroy the niche they’d spent all this time building together; all this time just so Hannibal could rip it all out from beneath Will’s feet once it had begun to feel truly real.

A disbelieving, hysterical laugh bubbles out of Will’s throat. He puts his hands in his hair and pulls, hard enough to make him question the actual reason behind the tears stinging in his eyes.

“You couldn’t just say it, could you?” Will shakes his head as he speaks. “You couldn’t let yourself be that vulnerable even *now*.” He hears Hannibal sigh, quietly. Will leaves the kitchen, spitting words out over his shoulder as he goes to retrieve his coat from the rack in

the foyer. “You should keep your fear in front of you, doctor. You never know when you might have to kill it.”

He leaves the house without looking back and feels several times as if he’ll fall on the way to his car. Hannibal doesn’t go after him. Will turns the key in the ignition and peels out of the driveway onto the street.

The commercial on the radio is loud. It fills his brain like smog, and by the time he gets off the freeway and navigates through the back roads near his home about an hour later, his mind is blanked out with superficial thoughts of grouting the tile in the bathroom and planting azaleas on the side of the house. At some point during his drive over, it started drizzling. Most of the ride he doesn’t remember.

The sky is a bluish slate color, and he thinks that’s just perfect. Everything’s just perfect.

He begins to slow down when he hits the dirt road that leads home but not soon enough to stop in time. He slams on the brakes when something huge and black steals his attention from the opaque silver rainclouds. He shuts the car off and jumps out, panicked and thinking he’s just hit Simon. There’s blood on the fender and solid bits of meat. A smattering of dark, soaked hairs occupies the centermost point of the red. It drips down and freckles the moist earth black.

Will looks up in the direction the animal fled and runs. He leaves his car in the middle of the road, engine idling.

“Simon?”

The woods are dark, encased in shadow by the tops of the trees that even with most of their leaves gone, manage to obscure the passage of moonlight with their gnarled, overlapping branches. He follows the trail of blood.

Will crouches beneath the underbrush and passes through into a clearing, and he finds the stag twitching, dying with its guts splayed out on the ground. It makes soft whining noises, and Will can’t help but approach the pitiful animal. He kneels down in front of its massive form and takes the wet muzzle in his hands. The blood runs faster through his fingers when he tries to staunch the bleeding. It gets in his mouth, the blood and the viscera, the cries. It tastes of sin; it tastes foul yet provocative the way murder feels. It is the righteous, terrifying rush of shooting Garrett Jacob Hobbs and the frightening, beautiful unity created when he and Hannibal are wrapped up in each other’s arms.

The fur recedes from the quivering beast’s body, and like an anthropomorphic werewolf shifting back into the form of a man, the hart, the psychopomp, becomes Hannibal. His flesh rots all over as Will looks on.

His broken body bleeds, clothed only in the overcoat Will awoke in their first morning together. The antlers protruding from the back of his head in an awful crown are weakened and dulled around the points. The tines turn to ash when Will touches them.

He doesn't remember crying, though the wetness on his cheeks may be blood. His eyes are clear when he takes the hand Hannibal offers to him. He lies down with Hannibal and listens to him sputter around the blood saturating his throat as he speaks.

Hannibal tells him the story of the wendigo, and his words are Will's fathers from when Will was just a teenager many summers ago. The memory is like a branding iron pressed to his flesh. It's Hannibal's hand breaking through the protective shell of his skin and goring his stomach with his arm so his elbow is lined up with Will's abdomen.

Will hears his father's voice, sees him as a much younger man than Will is now making ham sandwiches at Clarkco State Park in Mississippi. He hears him say, *"What do you think you'd do if you ever saw one, Will?"*

His father taught him to fish. He'd never shot a gun.

But he'd said, *"I guess I'd kill it."*

Will convulses twice when Hannibal's fingers brush against his spine and sever the column. They are bleeding everywhere. Hannibal drapes the long flap of the coat he wears over Will's shivering naked body like Caesar in his final moments covering himself with his toga. His arm remains submerged in Will's body.

They are unbreakable; they are interlocked. They are mated.

"You wouldn't try to save him?" His father had asked, biting into his sandwich.

Will answered with his mouth full, *"People like that don't want to be saved."*

"But you wouldn't try?"

Hannibal is kissing Will's lips, and the blood brims out of his mouth when it opens against Will's. Will puts his hands in Hannibal's hair, and the remaining charred bits of Hannibal's antlers crumble. He knows he's crying now; knows he's sobbing into Hannibal's neck, begging for it to be undone, even as he knows that this can't be anything but a dream.

"No, I'm not ready yet." Will whispers.

"You will be." Hannibal slides his hand out of Will's stomach and holds Will's face with a warm bloodied hand. "You want to be ready for me."

"Mr. Graham?"

"I need you. Don't go."

"Oh, God, Vanessa, call an ambulance."

Hannibal takes one of Will's hands in his bloody one and guides it to his stomach, a mirror of Will's gaping wound. His body is already busted open and leaking entrails onto the forest floor. Will only has to press, and so he does.

"Mr. Graham, it's Kirk Dawson. Can you hear me?"

Hannibal is warm inside. His blood steams on Will's arm, fills him with an easy sense of peace and destroys his fear. He turns his arm up toward Hannibal's chest and pushes passed organs and beneath ribs to touch Hannibal's steadily beating heart.

"I only want you to be free, Will."

"Free from the fear that enslaves you." They say together in one voice, in the stag's ethereal voice.

"Help's coming, okay, Mr. Graham?"

In their same voice, they say to each other: "People like you are the only ones who can feel with abandon."

"Jesus, Vanessa, tell that guy to go around!"

As one being, they say: "You've done something to me."

"Step back, please. I am a doctor."

Hannibal smiles against Will's cheek. He says, *"Will, open your eyes."*

Will does, and the forest floor melts away. He sees Hannibal staring at him and holding his face. Words are tumbling out of his mouth: "…Wolf Trap, Virginia, it's late, and you're a jerk."

"We called an ambulance for him." Kirk Dawson's voice floats over Hannibal's shoulder. Will can't see him where he's standing off to the side of the car. He can see Vanessa out the corner of his eye. She's the one he usually asks to watch his dogs when he's out of town.

"Thank you." Hannibal says as he takes Will's pulse and checks his eyes. He turns to say something to the Dawsons that Will can't make sense of. His head is pounding. Straight out through the shattered windshield he can see that he's not on the road anymore. The front half of a deer is draped across his lap, and the mangled hood of the car twists down to block his field of vision. He leans to his left away from the deer to look through the cracked frame of the opened door. The front of his car is smashed into a tree.

Hannibal rubs Will's arm, and he realizes he has leaned fully into the doctor's front. Will doesn't pull away. He's too tired to pretend Hannibal doesn't feel wonderful, even if he is mad as hell about their last words to each other.

"I'm sorry, Will."

He panics, as much as his mind is capable of drawing him into a panic, that he's lost his legs or something worse. He flexes his toes and feels his abdomen with his right hand, looking down his nose to see that the blood spilled onto his clothes is only that of the deer.

“I’m sorry for the way I acted tonight.” Hannibal quietly revises, clearly understanding Will’s train of thought. He brushes Will’s hair away from his forehead and leaves a kiss there.

Will wants to say he should be; he wants to say it’s no big deal. But he doesn’t believe either of those things. He doesn’t know what he believes. He wants to believe in Hannibal, even as the world seems to be falling apart around them. For lack of anything better to do or say, he closes his eyes. Hannibal is pressing down gently on each of his fingernails and applying pressure to each of Will’s vertebrae with his fingers.

“Is this uncomfortable?”

“No, it’s fine.”

“Move your fingers for me; your toes, too. Do you feel any tingling?”

Will wiggles his toes again in his shoes. His fingers feel heavy.

“Some in my calves.”

“Should you be doing that, Sir? He’s just been in an accident…” Kirk fumbles with his words, obviously trying to help Will but not really knowing the best way to do it without seeming insensitive.

“He’s a doctor, Mr. Dawson.” Will mumbles exhaustedly into Hannibal’s collar. More incoherently, he adds: “And some other things.” He smiles, relieved, at the teasing pinch that earns him on his side. His ears are ringing. “Can I get out of here?”

“It would be unwise to move you.”

“I don’t think I have a spinal cord injury.”

“You have a concussion from striking your head on impact. Without further tests, it would be impossible to rule it out.”

Will reaches up and touches his temple where his head feels the most sensitive. His fingers come away shiny with blood. Far off, Will can hear sirens.

“You were right.” Will says, careful with the decibel of his voice as he can’t tell where the Dawsons are or if they’ll be able to hear. Hannibal seems to pick up on that as he leans in just a little bit closer and angles his shoulder so Will can see them in the side mirror several yards down the road waiting for the ambulance. Louder, he says, “We are compatible.”

Hannibal smiles, eyes glimmering with something akin to vindication. He looks hopeful.

“I don’t want you to be afraid of me.” Will mumbles, tracing Hannibal’s sleeve his fingers and pinching the cuff between his thumb and a weak middle finger. He watches the thyroid cartilage in Hannibal’s throat bob with a swallow.

“I only fear that you’ll change your mind, Will.” Hannibal steals a final kiss, this time from Will’s lips, before backing away to allow for the EMTs to swarm the car.

A board is lodged behind his head, and his seatbelt is cut open. He closes his eyes as they hoist him out of the car, not wanting to be allowed a closer look at the dead deer hanging through his windshield. He opens his eyes again on the gurney and realizes his glasses are gone. Hannibal follows at his side as they wheel him into the back of the ambulance.

The drive over is noisy. They ask him the same questions Hannibal asked him, and he gives variations of his same answers, leaving out the bit about Hannibal being a jerk. He sees Hannibal smiling in the corner of his eye well aware of the omission.

“I hit a deer and crashed my car.”

A beat of silence skips over the ambulance. The noise starts up again, irreverent.

“You have a concussion, Mr. Graham. We’ll check for spinal cord injuries when we get to the hospital.”

“I don’t *have*…” Will stops, dizzy.

“Will?” Hannibal’s voice is murky in the noisy ambulance. Will fights with the brace around his neck to look at him.

“I’m tired.” Will mumbles, relaxing when Hannibal’s fingers brush through his hair.

“Sleep, Will.”

“But she said I have a concussion.” He points feebly to the EMT sitting across from Hannibal at Will’s shoulder.

“That’s just an old wives’ tale, Mr. Graham. You can sleep if you want to. We’re ten minutes out from the hospital.”

He stares hard at her, eyes going in and out of focus. She looks like Miriam Lass. His eyes drift closed.

“Don’t let me fade.” He murmurs vaguely to the busy ambulance. “We’re the only ones…”

Hannibal hushes him softly, and Will sinks back into the gurney. When he stirs again, there is a tall woman in a white lab coat checking his blood pressure. She writes something on the clipboard hanging at the foot of his bed. He looks around and doesn’t see Hannibal.

“Welcome back, Mr. Graham. The paramedics tell me you were in some kind of accident.”

“Hit a deer.” He says distractedly, pushing to sit up and finding himself without a neck brace. “Did you find anything wrong with me?” Out of habit, he looks for his glasses on the side table and is surprised to actually find them neatly folded and polished clean. Hannibal must have pocketed them from the car before they rode to the hospital.

“Your CT scan showed no swelling. We want to perform a lumbar puncture to rule out other complications, which I’ll do now since you’re awake.” She turns to close the door to his room. “Turn on your side for me, please.”

He does. She fits her hands into latex gloves and tells him to be very still.

When the needle leaves his body, he asks, “Was there a man here with me earlier?”

“European, well-dressed, slicked back?” She asks, dabbing at the spot on his back with gauze and covering it with a Band-Aid.

He laughs at the description and says, “So he was here?”

“He’s with the doctor.”

“You’re not the doctor?”

She laughs and shakes her head. “I am a resident, Mr. Graham.”

Her dark hair is pulled back into a ponytail. She looks familiar, but he can’t place it.

“What’s the LP for?” He asks distractedly, watching her swish the fluid in the glass vial.

“CT scans can be inconclusive.”

“For diagnosing concussions or for diagnosing spinal cord injuries?”

“For diagnosing the things you missed.” She answers easily, swishing the crystal clear fluid until it pinks and eventually turns dark red. “Oh, dear.” Her voice carries laughter. “Not right in the head, are you?”

Will attempts to rise from the bed, but the thin blanket covering him weighs down heavier and heavier on his arms and legs.

He’s dreaming. That’s all this is. It will pass. He watches the bloody cerebrospinal fluid blacken and thicken to tar and chants to himself that it will pass and that he will be okay.

“How much of this is you, I wonder?” She asks, and Will recognizes the faint unbroken connectivity within her words. He recognizes Hannibal’s accent curving her vowels into sharp consonants. She drops the vial, and the room is swallowed up in inky, glacial darkness. He can’t move, and he can’t see her. He can only see the white lab coat draped over her shoulders like Elise Nichols’ white nightgown. Antlers pierce through her body; she’s Cassie Boyle, the girl from the field mounted on the stag head.

He is freed from the bed in that instant, holding her lungs in his hands. She becomes Abigail’s friend, Marissa, left only in modest undergarments. Cassie Boyle’s disembodied voice, built in Hannibal’s likeness, crawls through the black to find his ears: *“See?”*

He jerks awake with an IV in his arm and a brace around his neck. There are two coffees on the side table, but Will’s glasses are nowhere to be seen. The room is fuzzy in their absence.

Hannibal killed Marissa Schurr. She believed Abigail’s innocence; she was the only friend she had left.

The door opens, and Will waits. Hannibal crosses the foot of the bed to sit in the chair beside his bed.

“You are awake.”

“My eyes are open.” Will mumbles, twisting the blanket in his fingers. “I’m not really sure if…”

“If you are not dreaming?”

“Yes.” He whispers, eyes flicking back and forth on the ceiling. “Am I?”

“Would you believe me if I said you were not?”

“Tell me something else.” Will bites his lip and takes a deep breath. “Did you kill Cassie Boyle and Marissa Schurr?”

Hannibal crosses his legs in his seat. Will can’t look at him, though the restricting brace around his neck is only a convenient excuse.

“Yes.”

“She was Abigail’s friend.” Will says through clenched teeth. Quietly, he asks, “Does she know it was you?”

“No, and I suspect she will not put it together.”

“She *trusts* you. You took away her one connection outside of everything Garrett Jacob Hobbs dragged her through. *Why would you do that?*”

“Marissa Schurr was a ruse, meant to link Nicholas Boyle to the death of his sister.”

Will hears his own words from lecture so long ago: *“I believe the as-yet unidentified caller was our copycat killer.”*

“You warned him, didn’t you?” Will breathes, tossing the covers off his body and floundering a little bit when they catch on the IVs poking out of his arm. He stumbles out of bed, unsteady on his legs but determined not to be near Hannibal if he can help it. He flings the neck brace onto the bed. “You called Garrett Jacob Hobbs.”

Hannibal remains seated, legs primly crossed. He watches Will the way one might watch a magician doing tricks.

“Did you call Fontaine Preston?” He asks, dreading the answer.

The smile that works its way across Hannibal’s mouth is enough of an answer. Will’s stomach heaves, and he doubles over to vomit into a nearby trashcan. Some of it gets on the floor. He’s had nothing to eat since lunchtime. His stomach pangs angrily, desirous of food, and his neck stings with the intensity of his movements.

“He hurt you, Will. Even if he hadn’t, he was not a particularly polite person.”

“How could you make that kind of call?” Will pushes to his feet using the bed as leverage. “What right do you think you have to decide who lives and who dies?”

“I have as much of a right as any person has to take his life or the lives of others into his own hands.” Hannibal stands, and Will scrambles backwards for the door, tripping over the IV stand and sprawling on the floor in a heap. His limbs are still shaky, and he isn’t quick enough to stand before Hannibal is at his side helping him up. He struggles against him, pushing with all his strength but only wilting afterward with fatigue. “You knew already that I was a killer, Will.”

“You nearly cost Abigail her life.” Will spits venomously. Hannibal’s hand squeezes on his shoulder as he turns Will and sets him down on the bed. Hannibal kneels to a crouch before Will, and the scene is too familiar for Will’s liking. He scoots back up on the bed and folds his legs underneath himself. Hannibal lets him.

“She survived.” Hannibal’s eyes probe Will’s face, steadily coaxing him into eye contact. Will gives. “And we love her all the more for it, do we not?”

“This isn’t how you show love, Hannibal.” Will sighs, burying his face in his hands.

“It’s the only way I know how, Will.”

Hannibal touches Will’s knee, a silent plea for a reciprocating touch. Will pulls away, even as his skin screams at his folly. Hannibal’s replenished calm is still a salve; his hands are still an escape.

“I don’t think I want your love.” Will whispers, ignoring the horrible ache in his chest.

“What would you have me give to you, Will?” Hannibal sounds composed and unbothered, but Will can feel the sea beneath Hannibal's skin tossing with the first ill-tempered waves of a treacherous storm. “Tell me you mean what you say, and I will go.”

Will doesn’t mean it. He doesn’t want Hannibal to go.

“Get the hell out of my room.” Will bites his tongue once the words leave him. He thinks Hannibal might call his bluff, but he only stands to his feet and removes something from the breast pocket of his suit jacket.

He sets Will’s glasses onto his face and says, “As you wish, Will.”

Will looks up to find Hannibal bending down to kiss him and doesn’t flinch. The kiss lands high on his cheekbone. Will angles his head a ways and Hannibal’s lips graze closer to the corner of his mouth. Hannibal pulls away before it can go any further than that, and Will’s whole body cries out at the loss.

“Feel better, Will.”

Hannibal goes, and the room is empty and cold. Twenty minutes later when the doctor comes to speak to him, he is sitting in the same position Hannibal left him in. She takes his blood pressure and says he'll need to stay overnight for observation. She doesn't mention an LP, and he doesn't see any reason to mention it.

He calls Alana when the doctor leaves to ask if she can give him a ride home the following day. She doesn't ask why Hannibal can't, and he's thankful.

The night passes him by, and all he can do not to call Hannibal is curl onto his side and count to a thousand in his head before counting back down. Garrett Jacob Hobbs is whispering behind him in the dark, and he just wants to go home. For one painful moment he can't convince himself that his home isn't with Hannibal, whether they're at Druid Hill Park or in Jack's office at Quantico or tangled together in bed. He has to convince himself that his home isn't the mobile, foot-wide zone immediately surrounding Hannibal's body.

He turns onto his stomach and covers his head with the flimsy flannel pillow. He thinks about his dogs and remembers the cold fear he felt when he thought he'd hit Simon. He remembers how that fear doubled when he saw that it was the stag. Even knowing it wasn't real, he knew what killing it meant; he knew what it meant for his relationship with Hannibal.

And Hannibal had shown up anyway to bring him out of his nightmare with a warm hand on his cheek. He had followed Will, maybe to apologize or maybe to punish him for running. Maybe he had gone after Will to finally put an end to what turned out, after all, to be nothing more than a temporary arrangement between them.

Will had said it felt permanent, and Hannibal had said he felt it, too. He'd said he felt it, too.

"Damn him." Will breathes in the silent room engulfed in shadow. His trembling fingers pluck the phone from its cradle and he dials Hannibal's area code and the first four numbers of his cell. He lingers on the fifth number, presses it, and lingers again.

He hangs up the phone. Hannibal gave him a chance to revoke his words, and he didn't take it.

Will lays flat on his back and watches the ceiling gradually change colors from dark to lightening shades of blue as the sun rises. He wakes up at some point, not remembering sleep in between intervals of blue. The phone is clutched tightly in his hand, and he wonders if he called Hannibal. He hangs it up again and waits for breakfast to come. He's not hungry, but he'll need to eat in order to go home when Alana comes.

She said she'd be by at around ten. He counts the seconds and eats the powdered scrambled eggs when the nurse brings them in. They taste like cardboard. Distractedly, he hopes Vanessa fed his dogs while he was away.

True to her word, Alana arrives at ten on the dot. Will gets dressed and checks himself out of the hospital. He sincerely hopes this is the last time she ever has to see him like this.

They go out to the car, and Alana lasts ten minutes in their silence.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. It’s just a concussion.”

“You know that’s not what I mean.”

Will sighs and says, “He gave me an out, and I took it.”

“Why did you need an out?” She asks carefully.

“It was a relationship.” Will explains with difficulty. “It was a committed relationship.”

“I’m sorry things didn’t work out.”

Will doesn’t like the sound of that. He doesn’t want things with Hannibal not to work out. He just needs time to compartmentalize everything that he’s learned, everything that makes being stupidly, masochistically in love with Hannibal stupidly, masochistically wrong.

“I’m in love with him.” Will says out loud, not fully meaning to but letting it slip because he can’t believe he had the thought in the first place.

Alana looks every bit as taken aback by his impromptu statement as Will feels. She is about to reply when Will’s car peeks out over the edge of the road in the distance. It’s out of the way, smashed into a tree. The body of the deer is gone. The hole in the windshield is gone.

“Wait, stop the car. Stop, stop.” Will leaps out of the slowing vehicle and runs back down the road to assess the damage to his car. There’s no blood on the ground or on his car. There’s a little bit on the seat from Will’s head wound but nothing else, not even fur on the fender, to suggest he hit anything. Will licks his lips and checks the car for his keys and turns the ignition. It still runs.

“Do you feel okay to drive the rest of the way?” Alana asks from behind the car door. He says something in the affirmative. “You go ahead, and I’ll follow.”

Will nods, dazed, and puts the car in reverse. He was only a few miles out from his house when he crashed. They drive for ten minutes, maybe less, before they pull up to Will’s driveway. He rummages through his pockets for his keys and finds them in his jacket. The dogs come running out to greet him and Alana both when he opens the door. Winston nudges his hand with his nose, and he turns in time to see Simon looking up at Alana expectantly and wagging his tail.

In spite of the slew of ugly feelings circulating through his chest, Will smiles at Alana laughing and bending at the knees to pet the dog. Simon doesn’t take well to strangers. Alana clearly managed to make a positive impression on the skittish Burmese mountain dog in the few times that she’d been over.

Will can relate to that. Alana feels safe in a way that Hannibal doesn’t anymore.

He invites her in for coffee and ends up sitting at the table playing with his thumbs as she bustles about his kitchen making it. He tries to intervene a few times but just gets in the way.

She pours him a cup and fixes it the way he had it the last time they had coffee together. After his second sip, he remembers he's still wearing his coat and shrugs it off so it falls over the back of the chair. Penelope noses at Will's thigh and has to contend with Fenris and Winston for the spot at his right. Simon lounges on the floor beside Alana's chair. He sees the food bowl behind her filled with dog food. He'll have to thank Vanessa the next time he sees her.

"They know you're upset." Alana says, leaning her elbows on the table and holding her coffee with both hands.

"Well, not Simon." Will tries to laugh. Alana chuckles a little bit as if to reward his attempt at finding the humor in an awful situation. As if prompted to react at the sound of his name, Simon whines. Will pushes his coffee away and holds his head in his hands.

"Will, what happened?"

"Hm? Oh, um…" He presses the heels of his hands into his closed eyes and looks out the window, hoping she'll ignore the moisture dragged across his cheeks and eye lids. His eye lashes are wet when he blinks at the blue cloudy sky just outside. "We're working through some differences." He hedges, bunching up the sleeves of his already wrinkled shirt in his fingers.

"You're working it out?" She asks, hesitant but firm. "Or, you couldn't work it out?"

He laughs miserably and chokes down the strangled sob trying to make its way through his windpipe. He shrugs and says in a quiet squeaking voice that makes him hate himself, "I don't know, actually."

"Will, does this have anything to do with your accident?"

"What?"

"Was Hannibal the reason you crashed your car?"

"No, I—" *Hallucinated that I saw a deer and swerved to miss it.*

"You, what?" She sets her mug on the table.

"We had a disagreement at his place, I was distracted, I got off the road; it's not his fault."

"It's not yours." She says, challenging him to say otherwise. When he doesn't, she continues, "I should give him a piece of my mind."

"Alana, really."

"You're in no condition to be left in the cold like this, Will."

"It's not that cold in here…" He looks into the hallway at the thermostat. He just fixed it last week.

“You know that’s not what I mean.” She sighs. “This is not okay, Will. He shouldn’t have left you on your own at the hospital. It was childish of him.”

That’s an interesting adjective to ascribe to Hannibal. What’s more interesting is that Will really doesn’t disagree.

Alana finishes her coffee and takes Will’s to the sink to dump the cold coffee left in his mug down the drain. She follows Will into the hall and says she’ll stay a while to make sure he’s okay sleeping with his concussion. He offers to keep her company, but she urges him to lie down instead.

“You look like you didn’t sleep a wink last night.” She says, ushering him into his room. She raids the small bookshelf in the corner of his room and makes off with Goethe’s *Faust*.

She pulls the door shut behind her, and Will sits at the foot of the bed and takes his shoes off. He startles at the scratching under his bed and relaxes when he sees it’s just Harvey crawling out from his hiding place. Will kicks off his pants, and the beagle jumps up onto the bed next to him. Will scratches his mangy fur when he maneuvers his way into Will’s lap.

He picks Harvey up easily and sets him down on the floor so he can get up, leave his glasses on the bookshelf, and close the curtains. He crawls back into bed and huffs a sigh when his face meets the pillow. The coffee did absolutely nothing for him. Granted, he hardly touched it. He’s hungry and exhausted, and he’s pretty sure Hannibal left him last night—or maybe he’s the one who left Hannibal.

He starts to drift off when he feels Harvey’s short stubby nails pressing into his back through his shirt. He’s climbing up on top of Will to get comfortable where his spine dips between his ribs and his tailbone.

Will sighs and looks up from his pillow to tell him to get down but stops short. There’s a note on the bedside table.

He stretches his arm a little bit and plucks it out from beneath the paperweight that is his aspirin bottle. The little vial clatters to the floor and makes him think of his dream. He shivers and brings the note close to his face to read it. He can smell Hannibal’s cologne on it. He can see that it’s his scrawled handwriting.

My dear Will,
I hope you will forgive me my intrusion last night, but I thought to feed your dogs before returning home. I enjoyed our time together, and despite the note we left on, I intend to respect your wishes and leave you be. You have changed me in many surprising ways, and I look forward to a future with you regardless of whether our relationship should continue as it once was.

H.

Will crumples the note in his hand and buries his face in the pillow. He lets the discord jumbled inside him manifest in a single abrupt sob. He throws the balled up note at the wall.

A dog scratches at the door, and after a long moment of stalled silence, Alana opens it. At least four of the dogs come running in. She pulls the door shut as quietly as she opened it, and he waits for her footsteps to recede back into the den before he turns his face and acknowledges the dogs in the room with him.

Winston is curled up on the floor at his side. Fenris is guarding the door, and Penelope is lying at the foot of the bed watching Will. Simon and the others remain outside his room protecting Alana.

He drops his hand to scratch Winston behind the ears and turns his face back into the pillow, ignoring the wet spots where his tears drenched the pillow case. He is tired enough that he doesn't have to fight to claim his sleep, and he is drained enough that his brain doesn't bother pushing bad dreams on him. He just slips under, pacing his breaths by the rhythm of Harvey's snores behind him.

Chapter End Notes

"Never turn your back on fear. It should always be in front of you, like a thing that might have to be killed."
From Hunter S. Thompson's *Kingdom of Fear: Loathsome Secrets of a Star-Crossed Child in the Final Days of the American Century.*

--
Meep? Please don't kill me. *takes cover*

Indian Summer

Chapter Summary

Hannibal and Will figure their shit out.

Chapter Notes

I love you the best/Better than all the rest/That I meet in the summer

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hannibal flips aimlessly through his rolodex of business cards, but none of the names catch his attention. Usually he can remember every foul offense committed by the names on the small rectangular pieces of paper; usually, he can remember the exact date and time each one was harvested and what the faces of the rude looked like.

However, as he scans business card after business card, the names ring unfamiliarly in his ears. He reads them aloud: Helena Sergeant, George M. Raptis, Shane Cleary, Lawrence Durant…

He tears each one out as he analyzes it, unhappy with every font face on every card. They flutter to the kitchen floor, softly sounding his dissatisfaction. Hannibal drops twelve before he realizes what he is doing. He kneels to scoop them up in his hands and disposes of them in the trash. The rolodex clicks closed, and he tucks it away in a cupboard beside the refrigerator.

His house is empty and silent. He does not err in calling it home.

Leaning against the counter, Hannibal reconsiders his handling of Will after his accident. He had not expected another confrontation. Even as it happened, he had not expected Will's reaction to be so detrimental to their relationship. They had patched up one quarrel only to find themselves dragging through another. He meant to ask Will how he knew, but there didn't seem to be time enough for trivial questions. In the end, it really mattered very little how Will had done it.

He always knew Will could catch him and that he would if Hannibal let him get too close. Hannibal had let him closer than anyone had ever been before. He hadn't wanted to show himself before he was sure Will would not run, but he had shown himself anyway, and Will had run; they both had.

It was neglectful and irresponsible, perhaps, to leave Will unattended at the hospital. This fact Hannibal accepts with slightly more finesse than he had managed in fleeing the scene last night.

Will was never supposed to have so much power over him. No one person was ever supposed to have the kind of access into his mind and into his heart that Will has effortlessly, just by looking into Hannibal's eyes. They are irreparably intertwined and bound together like two halves of an atom right before division; their separation now would spell chaos and destruction.

Hannibal sighs and moves toward the refrigerator. The Moroccan oranges are still keeping cool on the bottom shelf beside the milk. He takes the plate out and sets it on the counter, gently pressing the door closed behind him. He sets the oven to warm and leans against the counter once more, waiting for it to come to a satisfactory temperature. He had meant to feed the oranges to Will in a gesture of good faith, a show of the stability in their strengthening connection.

He sets the plate in the oven and thinks he must be an idiot to have thought he was ready for the weight and force of the bond he had worked so hard to solidify with Will. Never before had he felt so exposed, so completely laid out.

Will is dangerous. He is a threat to Hannibal's comfortable, easy way of life. Will can change his mind about whether Hannibal is worth the risk just like Hannibal can change his mind about whether Will is worth the risk, though somehow he knows that is not entirely true.

It had taken everything Hannibal had to walk out of Will's hospital room last night. He had been sorely tempted to leave Will with a gentle kiss to his lips, but he could not do it. Even knowing that it would have been enough to sway Will in his favor, he could not do it.

The delicate oranges wilt around the edges, and he removes them from the oven. He sprinkles them with cinnamon and eats them with a fork, elbows leaning on the counter; body curved over the plate.

Standing in his kitchen eating last night's dessert for dinner, Hannibal wonders at what Will is doing. He wonders if Will saw his note and what he thought of it if he did. He wonders if Will happened to notice his car on the way back to his house in Wolf Trap; he wonders what Will's reaction was to the absence of the deer he told the paramedic he hit.

He wants to call, but he abstains. He told Will he would leave him be, and he means to stand by his word, if only this once.

If Will comes back to him, it will be for good. Hannibal already suspects that Will, much like Hannibal himself, cannot abide this distance for very long if at all. He imagines Will's dogs huddled up around him in a defensive wall of teeth and claws, sensitive to their master's distress.

Hannibal eats the oranges. They are sweet in his mouth. He wishes very much he had kept himself together long enough to feed them to Will. They can be sensuous in the right setting when aligned with the proper mood, not that they really needed an aphrodisiac lately to get

going. They had not even been able to wait for dinner to be served before they were fucking on the counter top.

Hannibal could be adventurous, and he had established himself already as a spontaneous lover, but Will's idea of spontaneity, true spontaneity, that is, Hannibal has not yet fully adjusted to. There are so many pleasant avenues Will has found, serendipitously, with which to surprise Hannibal: his taste for casual wear on Hannibal, the way Hannibal's clothes hang on his body, his bringing Hannibal an actually delicious sandwich for lunch, and of course, the other thing Will had kept from him: the surprise.

He burns a little, trying and failing to discern what his gift for Hannibal would have been. He wonders if he will ever see it now that things have fallen apart.

He washes the plate, lurching slightly from the sugar loaded in the sweetened fruit. He has eaten nothing all day.

Normally he is not one to miss meals, but he has not been hungry since last night found him sitting in Will's chilly hospital room waiting for Will to wake up. He had stared at Will's peaceful form, trussed up with the clunky neck brace, for almost an hour before deciding he would go for coffee. Any decent food would have taken too long to acquire, and he had no wish to be far from Will when he woke.

He had returned with two coffees from a gas station a block away from the hospital and left the room for just a minute to speak with the doctor about Will's CT scan. It was clean. They detected no trace of the encephalitis, as he suspected. It would show on an MRI or in a lumbar puncture, and they had requested neither of those things from Will.

Hannibal sets the plate back in the cupboard and stands in the quiet kitchen, eyes on the spot where Will had leapt up onto the counter and knocked everything to the floor so he could lay flat on his back while Hannibal opened him up with his fingers.

Hannibal retires to his library, unsettled and restless. He takes down several books from the shelves without looking at the titles. He stacks and carries them in a small tower to the sofa and sets them on the deep violet cushion beside him. The material is clean and pressed, though just a few shorts weeks ago Will had been spread out for him like a delectable treat, naked and desperate and glistening with his sweat.

Hannibal blinks the memory away and focuses his attention back to the books. He takes one and drops it on the floor so the impact forces the front and back covers apart and opens the book to a random page. He repeats the action with each book, noting what pages they open to and trying to find patterns where none exist.

Will could probably find one if he looked. He could probably read the first and last sentences on the opened pages and create a story from them. His beautiful mind would have spun intricately complex webs through and around every word. He would have sat there with eyes closed, lips parted, and shoulders trembling finely with the onslaught of information produced by his incredible imagination as he revealed the meaning and intent behind every symbol and anecdote in full.

It is a magnificent oddity of nature: Will's mind, his gift for perception. He had turned it on Hannibal time and again, but Hannibal had shut himself down to the intrusion this time. Letting Will in had felt nothing like how Hannibal thought it would.

He thought it would be liberating, thought it would bring clarity to both of them seeing each other in such an unblinking light. If he had been ready, if he had been sure, it could have been a magnificent moment shared between them, unrivaled by any other memory Hannibal could conceive of. He knows it would have been. He simply was not ready when it happened; he was, as yet, unsure of whether Will would keep him or discard him, and to show all that he was and be left anyway would have been a greater blow than any Will could deal him.

Had Hannibal not feared Will's rejection so deeply, the moment may have been salvaged. They might not have fled from each other like children fleeing from the monsters of their nightmares.

He had been that afraid, loathe as he is to admit it. Will called his bluff as he was always wont to do, and Hannibal had been too compromised in the heat of the moment to return the favor. He had been too overwhelmed to take advantage of Will's fragility and spin it back on him. What shocked Hannibal most was that he found himself not desiring to abuse Will's weakened state of mind or his obvious desire for reconciliation.

Hannibal wants Will returned to him of his own accord, not because Hannibal tricked him into changing his mind, into staying. There should be other reasons, but there are none. Hannibal leans his elbows onto his knees and examines the opened books. Two of them are Physics books, one is Psychology, another is Philosophy, and the other four are classic novels.

From the Physics text he reads: "Negative curvature leads to practical indeterminacy of the flow: on a path only a few times longer than the characteristic path length, a deviation in initial conditions grows 100 times larger."

Hannibal stares at the tiny words on the page and wonders if perhaps this is anything like how Will makes his unexplainable leaps. He wonders if Will connects the untraceable pieces of a shattered riddle and fits them together within a set context that justifies each subsequent supposition until he discovers the singular mass of one truth; until he's solved the puzzle.

He reads the line from Arnold's *Mathematical Methods of Classical Mechanics* again: "Negative curvature leads to practical indeterminacy of the flow…"

Curvature is a simple, though fundamental, geometric concept. It is present in a line that cannot be called straight and in a shape that cannot be called flat. It is geometry's explanation of friction in two planar dimensions of mathematical equations configured into the half-sketched brushstrokes of an unfinished polygon.

He tries to understand Will in this way; tries to think of his mind as an asymptotic litany of melded thoughts, dreams, and yearnings. He thinks of Will's mind as a true reflection of the electric impulses firing through the synaptic nerve endings in his brain. He sees Will's imagination as a flawless black canvas of night sky embellished throughout by bursts of ardent color and incendiary sensation in the form of gunpowder on fire.

The last sentence on the right hand page of Heider's *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations* reads: "Our orientation is directed toward explicating some of the naïve, implicit principles that underlie perception, principles that connect the stimulus configurations presented to the person with his apprehension of them."

Hannibal finds it very strange how the line speaks to him. It paints a picture of Will he already knows to be real. Rather than think longer about why it frustrates him, Hannibal moves onto Huxley's *The Devils of Loudon*. He reads, "And so Grandier was accused of sorcery and the Ursulines were possessed by devils."

In earlier times, Will may have been one of those put to death for accusations of witchcraft. Hannibal often wonders what a less civilized society would do with a person like Will if law enforcement had been unable to find a practical use for him. He suspects Will would have kept it all a secret, would have lived a quiet life elsewhere with a moderately pretty wife and a son far from this madness Hannibal and Jack Crawford expose him to daily.

Hannibal stares uncomprehendingly at the opened books strewn on the floor, and he cannot remember quite what he had hoped to accomplish in looking at them. He thinks he did it to feel closer to Will, and that thought makes him inexplicably angry.

He leaves the library with the books still scattered about in front of the sofa and retreats to the backyard. It is night already, well after ten o' clock. Hannibal observes the massive oak beside the tool shed and remembers Will's bare legs poking out from behind the wide trunk of the tree. He sets his suit jacket and tie on the table where he and Will dined on steak and strawberry garnished angel cake and rolls up his sleeves before approaching the oak tree.

His slacks are not the best for climbing in, but he knows his body and the turns in the tree well enough not to ruin them as he pulls himself up using only his upper body strength and a precise step of his foot on the bark of the tree. He situates himself on a lower branch before twisting his body around the few that obscure the passage up. He levers his hands on two adjacent branches, swings his body over into a dip in between two vertically diagonal boughs, and sits. Hannibal leans his head against the tree and watches the stars in the sky. The stars are bright out tonight.

Boötes stands directly above Hannibal with his dogs, Asterion and Chara, dull points of light beside the more pronounced form of their shepherd. Surrounding the imaginary herdsman are Serpens Caput and Corona Borealis. Almost immediately beside Boötes stands Hercules with what Hannibal fancies to be a club or an axe.

Interesting to think the two men could have hunted together in the night; Boötes with his hounds and Hercules with his many weapons and great strength. In its antiquity, the myth surrounding the constellation proclaimed Boötes to be a hunter, and a protector in earlier times, of the bear. Celestial support for this theory of him as a bear hunter resides in the constellation's close proximity to Ursa Major, as if the man and his dogs are forever tracking the animal through the nocturnal sky.

Whimsically, Hannibal wonders if Will would see any kind of parallels between himself and Hannibal and the two figures carved into the Boreal Hemisphere, draped over the world like a

lens through which to see billions of years into the past. He sees some parallels: himself as a hunter famed for his noble pursuits and Will as the bear driver, Demeter's son.

He remembers Abigail's friend, Cora; remembers he likened her to Persephone, Demeter's daughter. He would like to meet the girl who had won Abigail's heart, in spite of their difficulties to communicate.

With the approaching autumn, Persephone would return to the underworld with her rightful husband, the masterful Hades. Her mother's sorrow would expunge the fertility from the soil and bring a frost to punish humanity for her daughter's folly. In the springtime she would return to her mother, and the bucolic world would rejoice for her mother's happiness. Their eternal suffering had been set in motion to explain the changing of the seasons and to rationalize the continuous cycle of life and death.

He wonders if Cora was meant to suffer for the same reasons or if hers was a matter of unfortunate, unchecked beauty. In either case, it would not have been her fault what happened to her; Hannibal finds something about her pain tragic and lovely. She is an innocent made to suffer for the evil of others.

Perhaps his fascination with Will extends to something of that nature. Perhaps he wants him so much because to sully or even to shatter his brittle purity would be to possess it completely.

The backdoor of his house swings open, and Hannibal freezes. He peers through the dying leaves adorning the tree branches around him and sees a silhouette standing in the dimly lit doorway. Hannibal watches the figure descend the steps of the deck and curiously study Hannibal's effects on the table. He can make out Will's curls on the sides of his head and the solid black bar of his glasses across his face.

Hannibal calls out to him, and Will jumps and turns to face the house. The yard is engulfed in darkness. Hannibal had not bothered to turn the porch light on before he left the house.

He twists out of his spot and works his way down the winding branches of the tree. They would suit a much smaller person better than they do Hannibal, but he is still lithe enough to bend the way he needs to in order to make his descent an easy one. He jumps down from the final branch, and Will is watching him with a confused expression.

Hannibal's eyes are adjusted enough to the darkness that he can see Will's face clearly. He suspects Will cannot yet see him.

"Hannibal?"

"Yes, Will." Hannibal approaches and takes the tie held loosely between Will's fingers. Their hands brush, and he knows he does not imagine Will's sharp intake of breath.

"You climb trees?" Will asks, clearly skeptical, as he watches Hannibal tuck the tie underneath his collar. Hannibal leaves it undone and drapes his suit jacket over his arm, sleeves still rolled up his forearms.

“My family’s estate in Lithuania was expansive. We had many trees.” Hannibal walks up the deck and holds the door for Will. “I made it my personal goal to climb all of them.” He turns to walk into the kitchen and scuffs his shoe on the kitchen floor when the sight of a covered dish on his kitchen island stops him in his tracks.

Will walks ahead of him, digging his hands deeply into his pockets and talking over his shoulder at Hannibal without looking at him. He says, “I know it’s way too late for dinner, but we never got around to eating the one you made last night.” Will fumbles with the foil at the edges of the glass baking pan. He sighs and scratches his head.

Turning to face Hannibal he blurts out, “This isn’t how I wanted to tell you.”

“Tell me what, Will?”

Hannibal takes a few cautious steps toward Will, gauging Will’s receptivity. He seems fine, as if the last two days never happened, though Hannibal is careful not to get his hopes up. Some of the foil tears beneath Will’s prying fingers but not enough for Hannibal to see inside.

“I was going to wait until I got better at it.” Will mumbles, stepping away from the counter like he now wants nothing to do with the mysterious container.

Hannibal approaches warily, calculating the odds of his finding a severed hand or a human heart inside. The prospect is exhilarating for many reasons; in part, he is excited that Will may have brought Hannibal his kill in exchange for a truce. Hannibal would dread it, though, if Will had done it merely to save their relationship. That was not the way Hannibal wanted to initiate Will into his lifestyle.

He goes to peel back the aluminum foil, but Will rushes forward to stop him with a hand around his wrist. Their chests are touching Will is so close to him. They have not even been apart for twenty four hours, but their distance has apparently made Hannibal far more sensitive to Will’s presence.

Will licks his lips and blinks. He is affected, too.

“You weren’t supposed to go.” He says quietly, relaxing his fingers around Hannibal’s wrist. Hannibal takes a chance on the stirring in his gut and moves his hand back, slowly, until his fingers graze Will’s. Hannibal watches Will bite his lip and revels silently when Will presses their fingers together. Will sighs and presses his face into the side of Hannibal’s neck.

“You told me to leave, Will.”

“I wanted you to come back.” Will huffs angrily, hand climbing up Hannibal’s arm to cling to his biceps. “You keep expecting me to leave you; it’s a miracle I don’t.”

Hannibal circles his arms about Will’s waist. Will bunches Hannibal’s sleeve in the fingers of one hand and holds him around the back of his neck with the other.

It takes a herculean effort on Hannibal’s part to say the words, “I was afraid.”

Will presses his body in closer to Hannibal's and holds him. He nods against Hannibal's clavicle.

"I know." Will sighs, nuzzling Hannibal's throat where his teeth marks used to be. "You should've let yourself be afraid."

Hannibal remembers what Will said about fear, about keeping it in front of him. He pulls Will in tighter so it is almost a challenge to breathe around their compressed bodies. Hannibal wants nothing in front of him but for Will. It's been decided.

"Casson was a gift." Hannibal whispers. He is deliriously proud that Will does not shiver.

"So was Cassie Boyle." Will fills in for him, easing out of Hannibal's grasp but keeping their bodies in line with each other. Will ducks his head slightly, causing his hair to brush across Hannibal's forehead in a delicate tease of sensation. "And Marissa Schurr was…"

Hannibal lets Will trail off, rubbing his hands along the small of Will's back and pressing down into T11 and T12. Will loves the stimulation to his vertebrae. He never says so, but Hannibal can tell in the vaguely eager way Will's body relaxes around the touch of Hannibal's fingers when they near the spinal nerves. Since his accident, and since the stress of their short-lived separation, it probably feels better than it did before.

"Marissa Schurr was rude to her mother." Will closes his eyes and removes his hand from Hannibal's neck to rub at his eyes under his glasses.

"Have you slept, Will?"

"What? Oh, a little." He shakes his head. "Alana stayed with me this morning and made me. You'd better steer clear of her for a while." He warns distractedly. There is no need for Hannibal to ask why. He knows Alana will defend Will against anyone, be it Jack Crawford or Hannibal himself. If he were a luckier man, Will may have chosen her over Hannibal. "I'm not tired."

Hannibal does not believe him, but it makes no difference. It is too late to send Will back on the road for an hour long journey back to Wolf Trap. He will stay with Hannibal tonight.

He watches Will reorient his glasses on his nose and then drop his eyes to the covered dish on the counter. Hannibal opts not to think about it for a few seconds longer and bends down to kiss Will on the mouth. Will is quite tired, contrary to his words; Hannibal is impressed he braved the roads in his state to come and see Hannibal. Will leans into their kiss, and his breath is warm against Hannibal's skin. He wants Will laid out; he wants Will beneath him, above him, inside him. He wants him at his side until time stops and the world ruptures around their tangled forms.

Will breaks the kiss, and his breaths come quickly against Hannibal's lips. His voice is soft when he says, "They're crab cakes."

"What?" Hannibal kisses Will again, muffling his reply. Drunkenly, Hannibal kisses Will's throat, his jaw, his cheek. Will's fingers twist into Hannibal's vest.

“I’ve been taking a cooking class here in town, and I made you crab cakes.” Will says in one rushed sentence.

Hannibal stands straighter, not relinquishing his hold on Will’s hips. He searches Will’s eyes and finds him nervous, hesitant, and uncertain. Hannibal turns to the covered dish and removes the aluminum to find the aforementioned crab cakes.

Pride swells unexpectedly in his chest. A soft laugh escapes him, and Will loops his arm around Hannibal’s back.

“Sorry if you ate earlier. The first batch fell apart in the oil, the second time I forgot butter, and then I realized I was out of salt, so I had to go the store, and—”

Hannibal kisses Will upwards of five times before releasing him. Will is flushed, and his glasses have been pushed askew. He makes no attempt to finish his sentence. He only tips his head back and allows Hannibal to scent the pulse at his neck before moving behind his ear and then up to where his hairline crosses his temple. Will is a conductor, and Hannibal is a current of electricity.

Hannibal feels brave, but he is also terrified. The mélange of conflicting emotions inspires him to speak.

“I thought you wanted nothing to do with me.” Hannibal says softly into Will’s cheekbone.

“I can’t be…” Will sighs, turning his face into Hannibal’s chest. His voice is muffled when he begins again. “I told you before that this felt permanent, that I can’t go back.”

“But do you wish you could, Will?”

A loaded silence passes between them, and Will holds on tighter, so Hannibal does, too. His only answer it to shake his head against Hannibal’s neck.

Will is warm. Of course, he is still running a slight fever and wearing too many layers. Hannibal unzips the heavy fishing jacket and pushes it off Will’s shoulders, not intending to come across as suggestive though a pleasant heat starts stirring in the pit of his stomach. Will lets him take the jacket and obviously misunderstanding Hannibal’s intention, begins to undo Hannibal’s vest buttons.

Hannibal laughs and stops Will’s fingers, lightheaded for all that they do not shake against his. He licks his lips.

“Take down some plates, would you, Will?”

“You haven’t eaten already?”

Hannibal thinks to choose his words more carefully but disregards the anxiety the truth makes him feel and speaks it. He tells Will as he is making for the foyer to hang the jacket up that he skipped dinner tonight. He returns to find Will clutching two plates and staring at Hannibal as if has just sprouted two heads.

“Dramatic, aren’t you?” Will teases, delight sparking in his eyes.

“When I wish to be.” Hannibal says, taking the plates from Will into the dining room. He returns for the crab cakes. There are no sides to accompany the dish, but it does smell delicious all the same.

“How long have you been taking this class, Will?”

He turns to find Will gone from the kitchen. He walks back in and after a moment, Will emerges from the hall with a bottle of dark wine and the ice bucket. He hesitates when he sees Hannibal but then continues into the kitchen. He presses the bucket into Hannibal’s hands and takes down two wine glasses before disappearing back into the dining room.

Hannibal stands still for a moment just holding the bucket. He hears Will coming back for silverware and makes for the freezer to retrieve the ice.

Will leaves with the silverware and waits in the dining room. Hannibal takes the filled bucket to the table and twists the bottle into the ice. He sits down to find his and Will’s plates served. Will makes off with the pan and crumpled up foil before returning to sit beside Hannibal across the corner of the table.

Hannibal remembers his question and asks a variation of it: “When were you planning on sharing this with me, Will?”

“Once I got the hang of it.” Will says around his fork. Hannibal denies the urge to lean across the table and kiss the blush in Will’s cheeks. “I’ve been going since you made Quiche Lorraine for Abigail.”

Since he dreamed he had taken Hannibal in marriage; since they had talked of adopting her.

“That long?” Hannibal asks, surprised Will was able to keep it a secret from Hannibal all along without arousing any suspicion.

“You’re so sly, but so am I.” Will says with a shrug, though he is clearly satisfied with himself.

Hannibal frowns and cuts a piece of bready crab cake between his knife and fork. Will watches him smell the bready little morsel. It has the doughy aroma of unleavened bread, the dewy undercurrent of crab, and the potent tang of shallots. He takes a bite and chews, savoring the hints of paprika, lemon zest, and subtle spice of Tabasco.

Will smiles down at his plate and digs in. His joy is a funny thing to behold. Hannibal can identify it at all only because he knows that specific brand of elation; he knows the reward of watching another enjoy the food he’s cooked. Will is so often troubled or under intense pressure to perform in high risk situations that he so rarely looks this…vibrant.

Hannibal tests the sweating bottleneck under his fingers and finds it chilled enough to serve. He opens the wine, sparing a glance to the label. It is the Vérité La Joie. He pours Will’s glass and then his own. His mouth has lifted at the edges into a faint smile.

He feels Will's eyes probing his face. Once the bottle is corked and repositioned in the ice bucket, Hannibal turns to acknowledge him.

"Truth and joy." Will raises his glass to Hannibal, a shy smile on his face.

"Vérité la joie, Will." Hannibal clinks glasses with him, a smile of his own curving his lips.

Hannibal eats a few more of the crab cakes and discovers his hunger pulling greedily on the food in his empty stomach. He paces himself by Will, ignoring his newly ravenous appetite for the tasty little crab cakes.

"Did you watch Casson die?" Will asks out of nowhere, biting into an especially plump crab cake straight from his fork. Hannibal observes Will as he chews, swallows, and takes another bite. His eyes stay stubbornly on his food until the silence begins to get to him. He breathes in and out, evenly, and makes eye contact.

"I saw Fontaine Preston murder him."

"He died in the ambulance." Will says, remembering. "What was she like?" His question is reluctant but far from timid.

"She was clever, manipulative, and theatrical."

"Sounds a lot like you." Will mumbles into the lip of his glass. He swishes, too forceful for his lack of practice, and takes a long drink.

"I blame no one but myself for the things I do, Will."

Hannibal finishes the last of his crab cakes and takes another sip of his wine. He notices that Will is only a ways ahead of him.

"You don't blame it on…what happened?"

Hannibal blinks at Will. A blurry anger burns deep down in his core. He pushes it away, concentrating instead on Will's disheveled hair and rumpled clothes. Hannibal wonders if they look at all similar after his excursion outside. He doesn't think Will would remark on it if they did.

"My sister is not responsible for me, Will." Hannibal stands to take his plate to the kitchen, but Will stops him.

Hannibal eyes the fingers firmly holding fast to the back of his hand. He has traitorous thoughts of breaking those fingers that would dare to keep him trapped in stasis. He closes his eyes against the surreal flood of too-sharp memories. He remembers a destroyed aircraft, his parents' corpses, iron shackles rubbing his neck raw and bloody.

He remembers a bone-freezing snow and an open, whited out sky. He remembers his hand around Mischa's, both of them so small and powerless. He remembers wishing he had been strong enough to hold on, strong enough to protect her. He remembers wishing he had died rather than feast on her tiny bones.

Hannibal hears a gunshot in the far end of the woods surrounding the cabin. He's six years old in a familiar Lithuanian wilderness, and his sister is dead. He hears Will's voice like a murky echo of a wolf's howl.

"Hannibal, come back."

The wind is cruel and biting where it whips at his forehead and through his tiny coat. It is so strong it knocks him off his feet. He lies in the snow, imprisoned in the winter of his mind. The frozen body of the deer Grutas and his men killed lies beside him in the snow. It warps into the larger body of a reanimated stag.

The ice cracks as the beast shakes icicles out of its perfect white pelt. The blood stains its belly where the meat was eaten raw from the doe while its heart still pumped within its body.

"Hannibal, look at me, please."

The massive creature struggles to its feet and bends its neck down so its antlers brush Hannibal's cold tiny fingers. He lies still, trusting the animal only when the black eyes flash blue for one millisecond in time. Its antlers are a vivid red and transparent, as if they are made of cut rubies.

It nudges Hannibal to his feet and guides him out of the woods, away from the death and the ash and the rotted meat.

"Baby, look at me."

The stag glows, even against the backdrop of snow. Hannibal holds onto it, pinching its coarse fur between his child's fingers. He collapses again into the snow, unable to walk any longer. The beast appears to understand. It sinks to a resting position curled around Hannibal's small shivering form. The flurries come down faster than they did before. They come down bigger and heavier.

Hannibal buries his face in the pristine white fur stained red at the opened belly and buries his hands in between the warm, slippery ropes of large intestine. The animal nuzzles him behind the ear and whispers in Will's voice: *"Just open your eyes."*

He does and finds his head in Will's lap. His eyes shine with tears behind his glasses. He heaves a sigh and clutches at Hannibal's shoulders. Will bends down and presses their foreheads together.

"You scared me." Will breathes, brushing his fingers through Hannibal's sweat-soaked hair.

The corner of his mouth feels sticky. He turns slightly to confirm that he vomited. Some of it is on Will's sleeve. He can see grainy bits of crab meat and breading in the pale pink sputum. Further off are broken shards of glass and porcelain.

He attempts to sit up. Will helps him and supports him with a firm hand on his back.

"Will, I—"

“Careful, I think you bit your tongue.” Will hushes him, brushing his lips against Hannibal’s hairline behind his ear where the stag pressed its warm wet nose.

“Your stag.” Hannibal says, exhausted and labored in his speech. His tongue does feel thick in his mouth.

“What?”

“Your stag was there, in the snow.”

Will blinks at Hannibal. His eyes are the stag’s eyes.

He takes off his glasses to swipe at his eyes with the back of his sleeve. He presses them back onto his nose and sniffles. He shuffles beside Hannibal to get to his feet and hauls Hannibal up with him. He says, “Let's go.”

They are halfway up the stairs when Hannibal realizes what he saw was a dream.

“A beautiful creature.” Hannibal murmurs, throat burning around stomach acid with every raspy word. “Innocent, pure.” Will guides him through his bedroom to the connected bathroom. Hannibal rinses his mouth in the sink while Will runs a hot bath.

He unbuttons Hannibal’s vest, kneeling to finish the remaining buttons when Hannibal sits down on the toilet seat. Hannibal lets Will remove his vest and his shirt before standing to his feet to take care of his shoes and belt.

“Are you okay?” Will asks, touching Hannibal’s face with both hands.

“I believe the worst is over.” Hannibal assures him, squeezing Will’s arm in one hand.

Will wants to ask more, but he refrains. He gathers Hannibal’s shirt, vest, and belt from the floor and nudges his shoes against the wall. Steam billows off the water’s surface. Will stops the water when the tub is three quarters of the way full. He turns to collect the rest of Hannibal’s clothes, which Hannibal hands off sloppily folded.

“I’ll come back in a little while, all right?”

Will tucks the clothes under one arm and plants a soft kiss on Hannibal’s forehead, lined now with a cool layer of dried sweat. Hannibal watches Will go and then steps into the bathtub.

He washes a little where he feels the dirtiest, but for the most part, Hannibal lies still and soaks in the comfortable, nearly stifling heat. Will returns something like fifteen minutes later and sits on the floor with his back against the wall of the tub. He sighs and puts his head in his hands. After a moment, he turns and folds his arms on the edge of the tub.

“You’re supposed to be the stable one.” He says with a weak smile on his face.

“I never made that promise.” Hannibal speaks to the ripples in the water.

“You were having an episode, right? The crab cakes weren’t that bad.” Will’s voice is soft, experimental. Hannibal lets himself smile.

“The crab cakes were delectable, Will.”

The corners of Will’s eyes wrinkle with his smile. He huffs a soft laugh, touching Hannibal’s arm with just his fingers. Hannibal reaches up and holds Will’s fingers in his. He sighs, closes his eyes, and rests his head against the tub.

“Would you like to know what it looked like, Will?”

His reply is soft. “Yes.”

Will brushes his thumb over the back of Hannibal’s hand. He presses his lips to the inside of Hannibal’s wrist.

“It was white.” Hannibal says softly, turning his head to one side. “With red glass for antlers.”

“Mine’s black with feathers.” Will murmurs.

Hannibal opens his eyes and sees Will deliberating over whether to say what has come to his mind. He looks at Hannibal, and they watch each other for a long moment before Will asks quietly, “Was it me?”

“It was.” Hannibal nods, touching Will’s cheek with his right hand.

Will holds the back of Hannibal’s hand in his and says, “We should go to bed.”

He leaves the room while Hannibal towels himself down. The water swirls down the drain slowly. Hannibal quickly brushes his teeth, noting how tired he looks in the mirror.

He leaves the bathroom with the towel wrapped around his waist to find Will sitting on his bed with the sheets thrown back in his boxers and one of Hannibal’s night shirts. Hannibal smiles at the picture, noting with interest how Will’s eyes gloss down along Hannibal’s chest and stomach.

Hannibal lets his smile darken into a smirk as he turns to face the dresser of drawers. He drops the towel and says, “Do you like what you see, Will?”

He hears Will laugh behind him, a low amused chuckle. Hannibal knows there is a special double meaning Will associates with the words. He grins to himself as he pulls on a pair of boxers and a pair of sleep pants. He turns out the light and walks back to the bed as he is pulling the shirt on over his head.

Hannibal steps one knee onto the bed and stops. He looks at Will curiously.

“I took care of it.” Will answers easily, tugging on Hannibal’s shirtfront. “Lie down.”

“Did you lock the doors?”

Will sits up on his elbows, lifting one expressive eye brow at Hannibal.

“You lock your doors at night?”

“Will.” Hannibal sighs and turns to go. Will leaps to sit up and holds him in place with both hands on his shoulders.

“I took care of it.” Will laughs, kissing Hannibal’s neck. “I’m surprised you lock them, though.”

“Vigilance, Will.”

Hannibal lets Will coax him down onto the mattress and relaxes when Will drapes his arm across Hannibal’s chest. He loops a warm leg around one of Hannibal’s.

They lie like that for a long time in an easy silence. Will’s chest expands against Hannibal’s side with every breath.

It feels as though hours pass before Hannibal, convinced of Will’s sleep, turns on his side to face away from him. However, it would appear Will has only gotten better at fooling him. He winds his arm around Hannibal’s side and pulls Hannibal’s body back into his, creating a protective niche of warmth between Will’s front and Hannibal’s back.

Will noses at the nape of Hannibal’s neck, taking a subtle breath in. Hannibal knows exactly what he’s doing.

He wonders, vaguely, if it was so obvious when he did it. The gesture makes him smile anyway, even as he can feel Will nosing around in his damp hair and picking up the scent of warm water and faintly musky soap.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Will asks into Hannibal’s shoulder.

Hannibal holds Will’s forearm with both of his, considering.

“It’s okay if you don’t.” Will whispers, kissing his trapezius through his shirt.

“We will talk of it someday.” Hannibal says carefully, a promise issued in his words that he understands but simultaneously cannot grasp. He thinks Will does grasp what he means, which fails to surprise him at all.

They lie in silence a while longer, and Hannibal feels sleep pulling at the back of his consciousness.

“What was with the books?” Will mumbles drowsily behind him. A muted yawn punctuates his question. “In the library?”

Hannibal answers after a thoughtful pause. “It was an exercise in perspective.”

Will yawns again, burying his face in Hannibal’s scapula and squeezing him tighter in his arms. He asks, “Whose?”

“Yours, Will.”

Something in Will’s weight shifts slightly. He pushes himself up on the arm not wrapped around Hannibal’s midsection and leans over Hannibal’s side to kiss him flush on the bottom lip. Will pulls back so their eyes find each other in the darkness.

“You should know that I…” Will licks his lips and swallows. He takes a stuttering deep breath. “I’m in love with you.”

They watch each other for a long moment, and Hannibal cannot find his words. Something in his chest bursts and fills him with warmth. Will bites his lip, searching Hannibal’s eyes. Hannibal turns slightly onto his back and threads his fingers through Will’s hair. He kisses him, slowly, and against Will’s lips with his eyes closed, Hannibal says, “I am quite in love with you.”

Will laughs brokenly and kisses Hannibal again. His bottom lip trembles against Hannibal’s.

He eases down next to Hannibal again and presses his face against Hannibal’s neck. Hannibal concentrates, but he can feel no tears on Will’s eye lashes where they flutter against his skin. Hannibal holds Will’s hand in his and thinks, with an unforgiving clarity, that he will not let go of Will, not for anything.

They relax together and fall asleep, breaths perfectly synchronized.

Chapter End Notes

Arnold, V.I. *Mathematical Methods of Classical Mechanics (Graduate Texts in Mathematics, Vol. 60)*. Trans. A. Weinstein and K. Vogtmann. New York: Springer, 1989 (pg. 318). Print.

Heider, F. *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations.* Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1958 (pg. 21). Print.

Huxley, Aldous. *The Devil of Loudon.* New York: HarperCollins, 1952 (pg. 121). Print.

Crab Cakes
http://www.simplyrecipes.com/recipes/crab_cakes/

From *Red Dragon*: “You’re so sly, but so am I.” Lloyd Bowman says it originally.

--
Everyone go look at Hereticality's stag art on Tumblr! It's magnificent!

Wishful Sinful

Chapter Summary

Our love is beautiful to see/I know where I would like to be/Right back where I came

Chapter Notes

As promised…SMUT, FILTHY SMUT. GAWDS!! And Will makes breakfast. (Bottom!Hannibal featuring in this chapter)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will wakes with his cheek pressed into Hannibal's ribcage, sunlight streaming in through the window. It might be eight or nine. Faintly through the glass Will can hear birds singing, probably from their roosts in Hannibal's tree. The thought brings a smile to Will's face; he had no idea Hannibal did things like climb trees.

He shouldn't be that surprised, in hind sight. He probably needs to be in shape in order to leave his victims the way that he does. Not to mention, Hannibal had taken on Tobias Budge in a fight to the death. Tobias was a much younger man than Hannibal and a killer just like him.

The serenade was for Hannibal.

He sent me to Tobias.

Will runs his fingers down Hannibal's arm to the curve of his elbow, wondering just how many people he's killed and how many more have tried to kill him. He traces the soft inside of Hannibal's wrist and draws a gentle line across his palm; Hannibal's fingers twitch in his sleep, but he doesn't wake.

Sometime, very soon, Will knows what Hannibal will want him to do. He'll want him to make a choice: kill or be killed. It's the only way they are ever going to be able to have this. Will must decide that they really are equals in every way: equal in power, equal in ability, and equal in lethality. They will measure according to the amount of blood shed. Will knows; he's known for some time now.

Even if the stakes weren't quite so high, Will knows it's too late to go back. He can't undo what they've started together. He couldn't if he wanted to, and he very adamantly doesn't

want to. Hannibal loves him; is *in love* with him. It shouldn't trump everything else, but it does. Will is tired of losing every beautiful thing in his life.

Abigail is a killer, but he will keep her; Hannibal is a killer, but Will isn't going anywhere.

He is tired enough of being disliked that making a home with others like him seems rational. He's a killer, too, and they're keeping him. They've claimed him and been claimed by him; they are family.

Will stays where he is on Hannibal's abdomen a moment longer, luxuriating in the pleasant warmth issued by Hannibal's body. He wonders if it was always meant to be this way between them; he wonders if he really was made to be the one Hannibal fell for and worshipped and praised. He likes to think so, damning as it would be. He wants to be the one Hannibal loves. He wants to be the only one.

Hannibal breathes evenly beneath him even as Will pushes to sit up. He looks at Hannibal's face, unguarded and peaceful in a way that he never quite manages when awake, though Will can tell he tries.

The longer he is exposed to Hannibal's calm, the more Will can break it down and find every singular element that composes it. It's never intentional on either of their parts, but doing it calms Will down to the point that he doesn't always stop himself when he feels it happening. Usually Hannibal knows Will is empathizing with him exactly when Will realizes he is. Hannibal never asks him to stop. He never has, not in words.

Will marvels at how little they actually need spoken words to make this thing they're doing work. Hannibal understands Will; he knows where and how hard to press.

He knows Will understands, likewise, the things that will come to be expected of him. Hannibal knows he doesn't have to voice what he needs Will to do to show his allegiance, to promise it in stronger terms than language can lend.

He scoots back gently on the bed until his feet touch the floor and slips off the mattress to sneak into the hall so he won't wake Hannibal with the flush of the toilet. He returns to Hannibal's room to find him rolled over onto his stomach with his face turned to the side and his hair ruffled across his forehead.

Will grins and ducks into the bathroom to brush his teeth with the toothbrush Hannibal bought him a few weeks ago and gargles with the mouthwash for good measure. He reads the label while swishing the minty stuff in his mouth.

When he walks back into the bedroom, he fully expects Hannibal to be dressed and polished and ready to tackle the day. He is still sleeping, though, now with his face adorably buried in the pillow. Will wants to watch him sleep but internally argues that their relationship is strange enough without the added flavor of domestic voyeurism. He resolves to leave Hannibal to an undisturbed sleep but can't make himself leave right away.

He thinks about Hannibal jumping out of the tree. It had been too dark to really see how he did it, but Will had made out the shape of his body twisting beneath the branch and his legs

fanning out with the drop. Will wonders if Hannibal can dance at all, apart from ballroom and waltz. He's sure Hannibal can do those; maybe even the tango.

Hannibal can handle himself in a fight, he can get himself into and out of a tree without a ladder, and he certainly does more than hold his own in bed. He could probably do a lot with a human being he intended to kill.

Hannibal is passionate about art and sophistication, and if he thinks he can heighten a human being's worth with murder, he must approach each victim like an artist approaching a blank canvas, must hold the knife between his teeth like a paintbrush when he requires use of both his hands, must fret over every hair left out of place and take time to smooth it down with gloved hands, delicately, as if touching a child or a loved one.

He must respect their corpses as one might respect scrap metal insofar as it serves a purpose to create something infinitely better and far more important than the parts that made it ever were on their own.

Not respect; more of a convoluted type of gratitude that has nothing to do with the person.

Will wonders if Hannibal ever tastes their blood as he's killing them. He wonders if Hannibal likes the taste of it or if he only eats human flesh when it's been properly prepared in his kitchen. He wonders if he ever enjoys any one kill more than he expects to.

The thought should not arouse Will. It should not, but…

He tactically flees the bedroom and tiptoes down the stairs still in his boxers and Hannibal's borrowed shirt. It's slightly big on him as Hannibal is just that much taller and slightly wider through the chest. The shirt smells like Hannibal, and now that he's slept in it, it smells like Will, too. It's almost what they smell like after they've been in bed all day together. He's hopeful now that they'll get to do that. It is Saturday, after all.

If Jack calls him in, he'll tell him he's still fuzzy after his accident, and if Jack tries to get Hannibal to go in his place, Will plans to claim him as his attending. Hannibal makes a habit of getting everything that he wants. Will can make a habit out of it, too.

He is about to go into the kitchen to make breakfast when he walks by the library and his curiosity sparks. Sparing a quick glance up the stairs, he slips into the vast room of bountifully stocked shelves and the famed deep purple sofa Hannibal loves to fuck him on. Will runs his hand along the armrest and shocks himself with a flash of a memory from not too long ago; Hannibal holding him down by the back of his neck, forcing himself inside of Will again and again. He shivers through his smile.

It really is a lovely piece of furniture. He almost feels guilty using it for so many awful, wonderful things—almost.

He rounds the elegant, triggering piece of furniture and steps in front of the array of opened books. Hannibal said it was an exercise in perspective; specifically, Will's.

Squinting down at the pages as if they're written in Greek, Will really doesn't see how Hannibal would have been able to get anything from the random assortment of books. As far as he can tell, the eight titles have nothing to do with one another. They are of different genres and authors, and they come from different time periods.

One of the especially scientific texts turns out to be a Stephen Hawking book compiled of papers on quantum physics. Often, Will forgets how smart Hannibal needs to be to have done the professional work that he's done.

Smart and beautiful, Will muses, placing the Hawking back in its place beside John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

He hears Hannibal's footsteps coming down the stairs and leans back against the sofa, not bothering to hide his curiosity from Hannibal when he walks into the room in all his sleep-ruffled glory. He, too, is still in his nightclothes.

Will smiles up at Hannibal in greeting and takes the minty kiss Hannibal gives him after sitting down at his side. They look down at the books together.

"My attempts to channel you were fruitless," Hannibal explains with a sigh.

"How was this supposed to help you?"

"You make leaps you can't explain."

Will snorts and says, "So you made a leap *you* couldn't explain?"

Hannibal picks up one of the books closest to him, and Will reads the title: *The Devils of Loudon.*

"Hey, I read that book."

Hannibal looks at Will and hands him the book. Will flips through the pages looking for the scene when Urbain Grandier is burned at the stake. Hannibal watches Will turn toward the end and takes up another book as Will finds the passage where the rope breaks and sends Grandier tumbling into the fire. He reads the people's horror at his execution and smirks.

He always liked to think Grandier had sold his soul to the devil and corrupted all those pious women; he found it funny how even as they were killing him and even after his death, the people feared Grandier and his scope of influence.

He'd done the research years after he read it in college and discovered that Grandier's execution was most likely politically motivated and that the letter they found signed by Satan, Leviathan, and friends was probably forged or written under duress if Grandier wrote it at all.

Under torture he'd never confessed to witchcraft. Huxley had written him as contemptuous of his God-fearing brethren and eager to die for the crimes they attributed to him.

Will thought it was endlessly funny. He always had.

To think that one charismatic person could be condemned and burned alive before a crowd because of a few hysterical nuns and a scheming Cardinal. Huxley wrote the novel sarcastically as if coming from just as critical a viewpoint as Will. The book is a nonfictional work; Urbain Grandier really was burnt at the stake for witchcraft, and the letter confessing to a pact with demons really exists somewhere behind a glass case smudged with endless fingerprints.

He doesn't know why, but he likes to think if he had done what Grandier was accused of doing, that he, too, would smile on the way to the unburned pyre. Fear is a gauge to measure risk and vitality. It isn't a luxury afforded to dead men walking.

Will blinks out of his book-induced stupor and looks at Hannibal thumbing the pages of a book bound in leather. The whole room smells vaguely of leather and polish. It's a strange, comforting fragrance.

"Why these books?" Will asks.

"They were chosen at random."

Will leans over Hannibal's shoulder and reads from the book in Hannibal's lap. The text is all in German.

"Can you read that?"

Hannibal nods, brushing his hair against Will's as he turns to look at him. Will smiles and points blindly to a line without looking and says, "Read that."

Hannibal's eyes have that shine that they get sometimes. He kisses Will on the lips before turning to address the sentence Will's finger landed on. Hannibal covers Will's hand with his and guides his hand away from the page so he can read. Spellbound, Will watches the smile stretch slowly across Hannibal's face.

"What does it say?"

"In German, Will?"

"Yes."

Hannibal licks his lips and runs his free hand down the page, studying the words. His other hand still holds Will's.

"Aber ich habe sie gehabt, ich habe das Herz gefühlt, die große Seele, in deren Gegenwart ich mir schien mehr zu sein, als ich war, weil ich alles war, was ich sein konnte."

Will blinks at the language. He had studied French in school.

"Herz is heart, I think."

"Yes, Will."

“That’s all I know.”

“Would you like me to tell you what it means?”

Will nods, moving his hand so Hannibal can lace their fingers together. He presses his face into Hannibal’s shoulder and takes a few slow deep breaths. Hannibal smells like mint leaves and vaguely like tea. He probably washed his face before coming downstairs.

“But she has been mine.” Hannibal tilts his head to the side so it rests against Will’s. “I have possessed that heart, that noble soul, in whose presence I seemed to be more than I really was, because I was all that I could be.”

“That’s not what it says.”

Hannibal ignores him and continues: “Guter Gott! Blieb da eine einzige Kraft meiner Seele ungenutzt? Konnt' ich nicht vor ihr das ganze wunderbare Gefuhl entwickeln, mit dem mein Herz die Natur umfaßt?”

Will winds his arm around Hannibal’s back. He turns to nose at his neck, forehead pressed against his ear.

“Good God. Did then a single power of my soul remain unexercised? In her presence could I not display, to its full extent, that mysterious feeling with which my heart embraces nature?”

Sneaking under his shirt to map out Hannibal’s skin with his hand, Will smiles against his neck. He asks, “What else?”

“War unser Umgang nicht ein ewiges Weben von der feinsten Empfindung, dem schärfsten Witze, dessen Modifikationen, bis zur Unart, alle mit dem Stempel des Genies bezeichnet waren?”

Hannibal reads the text and Will closes his eyes to listen to the way the German clings to his accent yet only sounds impossibly more fluent for it. He imagines Hannibal learning German in college purely because he wanted to and probably learning other languages in addition to that.

He can see Hannibal as clearly as he can feel him warm and sturdy beneath his wandering fingers, much younger and wearing moderately tailored, yet inexpensive suits. He can see him practicing with whatever native speakers he could find just to get as much of a feel for the language as he could.

Hannibal pauses, sentence completed. He waits for Will to ask, continuing anyway when Will doesn’t. He brings Will’s hand back to the page and holds their fingers over the line so Will can see it as Hannibal translates. He says, “Was not our intercourse a perpetual web of the finest emotions, of the keenest wit, the varieties of which, even in their very eccentricity, bore the stamp of genius?”

Will’s breath catches, and he’s not sure why. Since he saw the books splayed out like this on the floor last night, he had wondered what Hannibal thought he would find by looking in the

most nonsensical, irrelevant places, but here they had just found it together; made a leap they couldn't explain outside of just knowing, uniformly, what it was and what it meant.

That was exactly the nature of what Will did. They had done it.

Hannibal had sat here, alone, thinking of Will and trying to be like Will in a way that didn't make sense to either of them. It didn't make sense, and yet it worked. It worked, it worked.

Will withdraws his hand from beneath Hannibal's and holds his jaw instead. Hannibal lets Will turn his face so he can kiss him.

Vaguely, Will is aware of his own hands leaving Hannibal's body and shoving urgently at the books before them to clear the floor. Hannibal catches on quickly. He tosses the German book and *The Devils of Loudon* aside before dragging Will onto his knees and then flipping him so he is splayed out on his back. He crawls in between Will's legs and lays siege to his lips, jaw, and neck.

Hannibal takes his shirt off Will's body and runs his tongue along Will's pectoral muscles where his heartbeat sounds strongest. Will watches Hannibal rub his cheek over the spot and pulls at the shoulders of Hannibal's shirt so it comes off, too. Hannibal presses their chests together, well-aware of how deeply in love Will is with the feel of their bodies lined up with each other. Will bunches the waist of Hannibal's pants in both hands and forces them down Hannibal's thighs.

They struggle with the remainder of their clothes for a moment before pushing the discarded items aside and groping thoughtlessly at each other's revealed skin. Hannibal pulls away and stands to get the lube he knows Will keeps stashed in a subtle footlocker at the bottom of one of the bookshelves.

Will lays flat and watches Hannibal move. He's definitely a dancer; too much easy grace in his step and natural sway in his hips for him not to be. He'll ask someday, and maybe Hannibal will show him.

He watches Hannibal walking back, beautifully nude and elegant and awake but blurred around the edges with the morning. He kneels in between Will's legs, and Will touches him with both hands, inspired and hungry and brave. He swallows once and stops Hannibal from uncapping the little bottle. Will smiles at the annoyance evident in Hannibal's face every time he makes him stop right before they're about to have sex.

"Could I…?" Will bites his lip and swallows again. His fingers curl over Hannibal's. "Would you let me?"

He doesn't know how to define the emotion that flickers through Hannibal's eyes. They watch each other, and awed, Will takes the bottle when Hannibal presses it into his hand. Hannibal kisses him, gently, on the corner of his mouth, and maneuvers his body over Will's legs so he can plant one knee on the floor beside Will's hip.

Their foreheads are pressed together right until the moment when Hannibal pivots his body to the side and lays flat on his back. Will watches Hannibal submit to him, and his mouth goes

dry.

He licks his lips and repositions himself in between Hannibal's legs, pushing them wider and shaking slightly in anticipation. Hannibal looks up at Will, eyelids at half-mast. Will pours the slippery lube on his fingers, rubbing them together so it warms to match his body temperature. He sits on his knees and circles the point of his finger around Hannibal's opening. He pushes one finger in, slowly, watching Hannibal's face.

Hannibal sighs and lays his head down to watch Will back. He drives in a little deeper and pulls back when the length of his finger disappears into Hannibal's waiting body. He presses inside of him again, harder than before, and bends down to kiss the inside of Hannibal's thigh.

They continue like that until Will feels Hannibal's hips twitching slightly to push himself down on Will's finger. He adds a second, and Hannibal groans, clutching at Will's arm and arching his back and neck so Will's only option is to move faster and with more pressure. Hannibal bucks against Will's fingers and releases a high-pitched sound that would make Will swoon if he wasn't already beyond the point of lightheadedness. He bites Hannibal's hip as he removes his fingers and shakily transfers more of the lube onto his dick.

"Wait, do I need a condom?" Will asks through gritted teeth, hoping against hope that Hannibal doesn't make him move from this place in between his legs.

"No, Will."

Hannibal pulls both of Will's forearms so he's sprawled on top of Hannibal. Will reaches down to direct his dick in between Hannibal's cheeks. He meets some resistance at first but pushes through with one sharp flick of his hips. His mouth falls open in a silent groan, and his eyes pinch shut; he's halfway submerged within Hannibal's body.

He fills his lungs twice and looks down at Hannibal. He's staring up at Will, lips parted to allow for quick panting breaths to pass from his supple, reddened mouth.

Will bends down and kisses that gorgeous mouth. He licks his way into it and groans as he pushes in all the way so his body and Hannibal's body join up and can become no closer than they are in this moment. Will leans down and nips at Hannibal's neck, reveling in the intoxicating prestissimo rhythm stuttering beneath his tongue.

Hannibal shifts beneath him, forcing Will's hips back with his own. Will looks up to find Hannibal's eyes have fallen closed. He kisses him on the cheek and begins to move.

He listens to Hannibal's short, airy breaths with a religious intensity. Hannibal throws his head back again, knocking it on the floor. Before Will can say anything, Hannibal's hands are in his hair, and he's kissing him, biting his lips, and moaning into his mouth. Will holds Hannibal's hip with one hand and lays his forearm flat beside Hannibal's head on the floor. He snaps his hips forward, Will's lips skipping up to Hannibal's cheekbone and then to his hairline.

Hannibal mumbles something into Will's throat. Will keeps moving his hips against Hannibal's.

"What, baby?"

"Tu nepaprasta," Hannibal mumbles. He fists his fingers in Will's hair, scraping his nails across his scalp.

"Huh?"

"Tu nepaprasta," Hannibal slurs again. A moan catches in his throat. "Tu tobulite."

It sounds almost like Portuguese, but Will knows it must be Lithuanian. Hannibal is clenching around Will and groaning in his native tongue. Will bites Hannibal's jaw and throat and drives into him harder and faster, both of them holding on.

In a moment of clarity, Hannibal's hands find Will's hips and push so they are more at an angle with Hannibal's. Hannibal arches his back slightly, and the next time Will slams into him, Hannibal shouts at the top of his lungs.

He bangs his head on the floor again and chants something under his breath in that language Will can't follow.

Will clamps down on his hips and remembering the angle Hannibal showed him, continues to hit Hannibal's prostate. Hannibal grasps blindly at Will's back, hands tracking lower to hold at Will's backside, coaxing him into a deeper, more insistent pace.

"Mano numylėtinite," Hannibal groans, arching his back again.

Because he doesn't know what to say to Hannibal, and because he doesn't want to shock him back into English, Will just lets his body be overtaken with his and Hannibal's collective frenzy.

"Mano mylėtojite," Hannibal whispers in between gasps. His knees squeeze around Will's hips. "Mano tik mylėtojite."

"I don't know," Will mumbles when he can't take not knowing what Hannibal is trying to tell him anymore. "I don't know what you're saying to me, Hannibal." He bites down Hannibal's collar bone.

"My only lover," Hannibal groans. "My darling, my only lover."

Will moans and drops from his arms, forcing one hand in between their clashing bodies to work at Hannibal's straining dick.

"My perfect Will."

Will grits his teeth hard enough to hurt and holds his breath, forcing himself to prod Hannibal's prostate again and again even as his body strains to hold him up. Hannibal gives,

finally, just as Will feels like he's about to pass out. He comes in Will's hand, body trembling with orgasm. Will releases a relieved, tortured moan and comes, too, inside of Hannibal.

They lie together on the floor, limbs slowly peeling away from each other. Will pulls out of Hannibal and holds himself there suspended over Hannibal's body until Hannibal's gentle, slightly quivering fingers guide him back down.

"Aš tavo, Will."

Will huffs a breathless laugh against Hannibal's shoulder and shakes his head.

Before he can ask, Hannibal says, "I'm yours."

Will blinks, turning too late into the kiss Hannibal leaves on his cheek. They look at each other and breathe and return back to normal. Will buries his face in Hannibal's neck, waiting for the grin to leave his face. Hannibal's fingers brush through his hair.

It passes finally, and he leans back enough to look at Hannibal.

"Do you want to shower first? I'll make breakfast," Will says, a soft smile lifting the corner of his lips again at Hannibal's surprise. "I am taking a cooking class, remember?"

Hannibal smiles, leaving a kiss on Will's bottom lip that becomes another and another. Will opens his mouth and sighs, finding Hannibal's tongue with his. They separate and touch foreheads. Will's eyes are closed, but he can feel that Hannibal's lips are still curved in a smile.

"Are you sure you don't want to join me, Will?"

Will laughs and pushes up to eventually sit back on his knees. Hannibal stays right where he is, a beautiful mess of sweaty hair and pinked cheeks. Will tracks his palm up Hannibal's shin and holds his knee in his hand, touching Hannibal's calf with his other.

Hannibal's eyes slip closed. His chest rises and falls twice before he looks up at Will again.

"How do you feel?" Will asks softly, running his hands soothingly up and down Hannibal's thighs. He moves higher over Hannibal's hips where the skin is a raw pink color but not yet colored with a bruise. Hannibal's hands catch Will's on the sides of his stomach.

"I feel whole."

Will's fingers slide out from beneath Hannibal's to touch his flanks and squeeze at the ribs he finds there. Will leans forward and presses a kiss into Hannibal's navel. Some of the semen drying on Hannibal's skin catches on Will's lip and he licks it away. He looks up to see Hannibal bite his lip.

Oh, my God.

Will's breathing turns ragged. He nips at Hannibal's skin closer to the dark smattering of his pubic hair.

He murmurs against Hannibal's skin, "Isn't there some kind of biological thing that should make us incapable of wanting to do this again so quickly?"

Hannibal's fingers weave through Will's hair and hold. He says, "The refractory period."

"Do we need to stop?" Will kisses Hannibal's hip.

"I do have a few years on you, Will."

Hannibal sits up, and Will goes with him, sitting back on his heels patiently. Will grins and says, "A few?"

He laughs at Hannibal's glare and struggles slightly to get to his feet. They stand together in the library naked and filthy, Hannibal frowning at the trajectory of his own semen. Will stoops to grab his shirt from the floor and rubs it across the mess on his stomach.

"Have you never bottomed before?" Will smiles, folding the shirt and tossing it back on the floor in a pile with the rest of their clothes.

"Never quite like this," Hannibal says reluctantly.

"So you don't always forget English halfway through?" Will grins outright. It wavers on his face slightly at the sight of Hannibal's ears flashing a dull red.

Hannibal ignores his question and scoops their discarded clothes from the floor and hands them off to Will.

"Really, though," Will says, mirth forgotten and replaced by something more like awe. He catches Hannibal's arm before he can turn and leave the room. "That was…You were really…"

"Really what, Will?"

"Hot," Will says around his laugh. He squeezes Hannibal's arm. Hannibal catches his eyes, and they stare, sanding down layers and layers of walls they've each spent their lives establishing.

Hannibal shakes his head, though the corners of his eyes wrinkle.

"Are you going to make a habit out of calling me *baby,* Will?"

Will makes a noise like a squeak, and Hannibal kisses him just beneath his cheekbone. He realizes he's blushing and swears under his breath as Hannibal turns to leave the room. They walk out together, and Hannibal asks what he's going to make for breakfast.

"I don't know. I'll see what you have in the fridge."

Hannibal walks ahead of him to the laundry room and doesn't see Will's noncommittal shrug. They walk naked across the kitchen, Will comforted now by the knowledge that no one can see in from the neighboring yards. Hannibal opens the lid to the washing machine and starts a

load. Will hands him their clothes and keeps his boxers so he can pull them back on. Hannibal throws the clothes from Will's arms into the washer and adds a few other sorted items of similar coloring to be washed, too.

They walk back into the kitchen. Hannibal stops to watch Will remove his apron from the drawer and loop it around his neck.

"If you think I'm cooking anything without protective wear you are very wrong."

Hannibal smirks and leaves the kitchen to go upstairs and take his shower. Will follows his retreat with his eyes, noting with tremendous pride that he slightly favors one leg over the other to avoid walking with a total limp.

He marvels at how comfortable Hannibal is in his own skin. Will's comfortable in his, too, which has never exactly been a problem but still manages to blow his mind when he thinks about how often they just walk around the house naked and covered in each other's various body fluids.

Will scratches his head and stares around at the space allotted him, remembering his purpose for being downstairs rather than upstairs with Hannibal. He ties the apron at his back and warily approaches the refrigerator.

"No fear, no fear," Will mumbles under his breath. He checks the vegetable drawer and finds some spinach.

Frittata it is.

He pulls out the leafy green vegetable and tests it with his fingers. It's fairly fresh. If Hannibal meant to use it for dinner tonight, they can go to that market Hannibal likes and buy some more. He digs around in the fridge a moment longer to procure eggs, milk, and tomatoes. He finds a small tub of goat cheese and checks the date. He takes that out, too, mentally listing off all the things he needs still.

Will preheats the oven and gets to washing and chopping the spinach. He uses Hannibal's bamboo board and makes a note to remember to polish it afterwards. Will fills a saucepan with water and boils the spinach for a few short minutes until it softens considerably. He drains the water and works on beating the eggs in a mixing bowl.

He has the milk mixed in when he thinks to chop the tomatoes. He does that and then adds Parmesan cheese together with the chopped tomatoes into the bowl. He rifles through the cupboards for salt and pepper.

Standing for a moment to recall the next step, he remembers he needs to chop some onion, too. It isn't strictly necessary, but he knows now that they add a nice flavor, so he goes looking through the fridge again. He finds one in the vegetable drawer, chops half the onion, and sweeps the bits with the blade of his hand from the cutting board into a skillet with a metal handle. He pours a tablespoon of olive oil into the pan almost as an afterthought and lights the fire beneath the pan.

He hunts for a clove of garlic in the fridge and hurriedly minces it and adds it to the saucepan before the onions start to burn on him. He shovels the cooked spinach into the pan over the onions and mixes it all together. He hears Hannibal walking up behind him as he's pouring the egg batter over the spinach and onion mixture.

Hannibal rests his chin on Will's shoulder and assesses the meal Will has prepared.

"Frittata," he says, kissing Will's cheek and wrapping his arms around Will's waist.

"I saw the spinach and went with it."

Will sets the bowl down and delicately spreads the spinach and onions so the egg can move around on the rest of the pan. Some jumps out of the pan and gets on the stove, and Will swears. He promises to clean it afterwards, but Hannibal doesn't say anything.

"Goat cheese," he says under his breath, looking around for the small container. Hannibal steps out from behind him and brings it from the kitchen island. "Thank you."

Will reaches for a clean fork, pressing his naked back into Hannibal's clothed front. He ignores the rush of heat that courses up his neck and across his face. Hannibal doesn't because he never does, and Will nearly drops the opened tub. He manages to get the white clumpy cheese adequately sprinkled over the face of the frittata and nudges Hannibal with his shoulder so he'll step back and allow him to set the pan in the preheated oven.

No sooner than he shuts the oven door, Hannibal is on his neck biting and licking him. Will turns to face him and knocks a few things over accidentally when Hannibal lifts him up onto the counter.

"Do you not own anything casual?" Will asks, running his fingers along the black vest and tapping on the button of Hannibal's slacks. "Or did you put these on because you know I like you fully dressed when we go?"

Hannibal smiles with his eyes, reaching behind Will to untie the apron strings. Their chests press together, and Hannibal's wet hair brushes Will's warm forehead. Hannibal pulls the apron over Will's head and tosses it uncaringly to the floor. Will bites his lip and waits, heart already pounding in his ears.

"A cross between the two, I think," Hannibal murmurs. He slides his hands onto Will's hips and squeezes so the thin material of Will's boxers pinches between his fingers. Will gasps and holds onto Hannibal's shoulders, pressing his face into Hannibal's neck. "Ten more minutes for the frittata, Will?"

Will bites his lip and nods. He says, "A few more after that to cool."

Hannibal nuzzles Will's hair and breathes in, inching the only bit of fabric Will is wearing down. Will pushes off the counter with one hand so Hannibal can get them past his thighs. He sits back down on the cool counter top.

Before he can get comfortable, Hannibal yanks him off and spins him around so he's pressed at the waist against the edge of the counter top. He sees Hannibal pulling a bottle of lube out of his pocket over his shoulder and groans, laying himself flat against as much of the counter as he can. The counter is only long enough for his chest, so he knocks Hannibal back with his hips to make room.

Hannibal's fingers are warm and quick, and Will hardly even adjusts to the feel of them before he hears Hannibal's zipper come undone. He braces himself but still cries out when Hannibal breaches his body.

"Fuck, shit, Hannibal—" Will groans into his arm, pressing back as much as he can. Hannibal moves almost too quickly for him to keep up in the stance he now can't move out of. Hannibal's one hand holds tightly to one shoulder and presses him harder into the counter, hips unrelenting in their merciless pace. Will's hands fly out for a handhold, and one of the pans clatters to the floor. Faintly, Will hears the oven timer going off. Hannibal slows and pulls out of him.

Unable to speak or stand upright, Will's body deflates and sags to his knees, still weakly holding onto the edge of the counter with both hands. He's peripherally aware of Hannibal removing the spinach frittata from the oven and setting it on the kitchen island behind him to cool. It smells warm and earthy and creamy. Will thinks he'd be hungry if there were room left in his body to feel anything other than this rapacious desire pooled in the pit of his stomach.

Hannibal's fingers brush the back of his neck, and Will looks down, baring more of his neck for Hannibal to touch. He trails his fingers down Will's spine, forking to the right to trace the last few of Will's ribs. He presses his face into the nape of Will's neck and draws him back into his lap.

Will looks down to see that Hannibal's pants are bunched up around his thighs. Hannibal lifts him slightly by his hips, and they're fucking again, slower this time.

Will wants to kiss Hannibal, but he's out of reach nipping in between Will's shoulder blades. Hannibal comes up to taste the sweat at Will's hairline and whispers something else in Lithuanian that Will understands in a way that transcends his cognitive abilities; or maybe in a way that is so ingrained in his cognitive abilities that he can't follow the thought back to its source. Hannibal says, "Aš tave myliu."

"I love you," Will gasps, grinding down into Hannibal's lap and writhing. "Love you, I love you."

Hannibal pulls him down into his lap one more time, and Will comes with a strangled moan. His body jerks twice above Hannibal's before he feels Hannibal coming, too.

Their bodies halt together in a strained union until Hannibal's orgasm releases him enough for his limbs to relax around Will's. They sigh, and Will chuckles quietly to force down the loose, clattering feeling in his chest. He lifts up off of Hannibal, aided by Hannibal's hands, and slides across his lap to plop gracelessly to the floor beside him.

He watches Hannibal pull his pants back up and looks for his boxers. They're about five feet away near the fridge. Hannibal probably tossed them over there on purpose.

"Fuck the refractory period," Will huffs.

"I believe we just did."

Hannibal kisses Will on the cheek, a faint smile there. He stays a moment longer, waiting. Will forces himself to turn and face him.

"How did you know, Will?"

Will sighs and mumbles, "I didn't really." He thinks about it a while longer, contemplating Hannibal's chin and kissing him to help himself remember. He says against Hannibal's lips, "I didn't, but I did."

He pulls away, and they watch each other, not blinking and not speaking. Hannibal reaches forward to touch Will's forehead and brush his hair away from his eyes. His fingers trail into Will's hair and knead at his scalp. Hannibal blinks once, looks down, and then drops his eyes to his lap. He goes to take his hand out of Will's hair, but Will holds his hand there, turning to kiss the inside of his wrist.

"Don't pull away from me now," Will whispers into skin. "Don't, Hannibal."

Will lets Hannibal's hand inch down to hold his face. They find each other's eyes again.

"I love you, Will."

Will swallows and tries to keep the ecstatic jubilance leveled within himself where it's flying around in his chest trying to dismantle his ribcage and pulverize his organs. He doesn't want to frighten Hannibal back into his shell. He doesn't want Hannibal to realize he's withdrawing and become angry with himself over it.

Instead of reacting in any grandiose way other than to just smile and kiss Hannibal lightly on the lips, Will says, "Breakfast probably got cold."

"I won't throw it out this time," Hannibal says, getting to his feet and helping Will along with him.

Will watches Hannibal's face and looks away. He can tell without the unnecessary examination that it was difficult for Hannibal to make that joke. Will frowns at his boxers and carries them limply to the laundry room. He returns to find Hannibal setting the pan in the cooled down oven to warm again.

"Go shower, Will. We can eat when you're clean."

Hannibal, rumpled and lovely and winded by the workings of his heart, accepts the kiss Will gives him on his cheek. Will jogs up the stairs, jumps in and out of the shower, slips twice, and dresses while his body is still slick with water and steam.

He pads back downstairs, barefoot and wearing a pair of Hannibal's comfy pajama pants and a borrowed shirt. Hannibal is sitting on one of the stools reading a book when Will slides in next to him. Will couldn't have been in the shower longer than five minutes based on the suspicious look Hannibal gives him.

"Oh, the frittata," Will blurts out, jumping off the stool to retrieve the pan from the oven with a mitt carefully wrapped around the handle.

He serves their plates and notices the title of the book Hannibal's reading from. It's more of the German.

Hannibal catches Will looking and explains. He says, "*Die Leiden des jungen Werther*—The Sorrows of Young Werther."

"What's sorrowful about it?"

Will sits back down and digs into his breakfast, leaving the spatula in the pan with the frittata. Hannibal takes a bite of the frittata, chews, and swallows. He appears to consider the question in his head.

"Werther descends into madness."

"Why?"

"He loved and was not loved back."

Hannibal swallows, taking another bite of the frittata. He stands before Will can think of what to say and takes the orange juice out of the fridge. He pours Will a glass and then another for himself.

"Oh, thanks," Will mumbles bashfully. He takes a refreshing sip. It's a nice contrast with the spinach and gooey goat cheese. Will wonders if Hannibal knew the flavor pair would work or if he just grabbed the first thing on hand. "I don't have the hang of this chef stuff yet."

"With practice, Will."

Hannibal smiles into his orange juice and takes a drink. Will chews his mouthful of frittata and thumbs at the thick leather binding of the book.

"Why didn't she love him back?"

"She was an engaged woman." Hannibal considers his words. "One could say her loyalties lied elsewhere."

Will swishes his orange juice in the glass, watching how the pulp adheres to the sides. He takes a slow drink and licks some of it from his upper lip. He thinks Hannibal probably made it.

"When are you going to take the next one?" Will asks significantly, turning to gauge Hannibal's reaction.

His fork stops halfway to his lips, and his eyes are intrigued. He smiles, takes the bite, and dabs at the corner of his mouth with a napkin before he speaks. He says, “I have yet to make any concrete plans.”

Will takes a breath, feeling a lot like he’s been punched in the diaphragm. He nods as if to reassure himself and to accept what Hannibal is really telling him; that he means to kill someone very soon and that Will is okay with it. He gulps down a lungful of air and takes another determined bite of the frittata. He rubs his fingers across his mouth and then lays them flat in his lap so he won’t have to address the fact that they’re trembling.

“I want to be there,” Will says, losing his breath about a third of the way through. He clears his throat and tries again. “I want to be there the next time.”

Hannibal’s hand covers his in his lap and squeezes. Will looks up, and Hannibal is positively beaming.

“The frittata is wonderful, Will.”

Hannibal says it’s wonderful, but he’s really saying a million other things, too. Will hears every tepid afterthought and every burning hope and every frigid fear.

Hannibal is afraid, but he doesn’t look it; he looks bold and kingly. He never looks afraid, so Will doesn’t let himself look afraid either. He smiles and kisses Hannibal on the cheek, flipping his hand so their fingers can slot together and lock into place. His hand lies still in Hannibal’s, its mild tremor gone.

He can’t go back. He doesn’t want to go back. No one can ever make him go back.

You want to be ready for me. You need me.

Will takes another bite of the frittata, and it really is wonderful. He’ll have to thank his cooking instructor when he goes back on Monday. The classes are paying off.

Chapter End Notes

From *Red Dragon*: “He was tired of being disliked.”

The German text comes from *Die Leiden des jungen Werther - The Sorrows of Young Werther* [German English Bilingual Edition] - Paragraph by Paragraph Translation (German Edition) [Kindle Edition] (2013).
Written by the masterful Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (who also wrote Faust); edited by Nathan Haskell Dole, and translated by R. Dillon Boylan—so yell at him if the translations are funky, you bunch of bastards.

Klimas, Antanas (2002). LITHUANIAN IN THE 21st CENTURY: PART II* Linguistic Snippets and Tidbits. *LITUANUS: LITHUANIAN QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ARTS*

AND SCIENCES, Volume 48, No. 4. http://www.lituanus.org/2002/02_4_04.htm

^I played around w/ diminutives based on this and what I could fiddle out of Google Translate. You *can* yell at me if the Lithuanian is funky.

Spinach Frittata
http://www.simplyrecipes.com/recipes/spinach_frittata/

End of the Night

Chapter Summary

Will takes an interest in Hannibal's hobbies.

Chapter Notes

Realms of bliss, realms of light/Some are born to sweet delight, some are born to sweet delight/Some are born to the endless night/End of the night, end of the night

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"You had a bunch of names in that rolodex," Will says into his coffee.

Hannibal takes a drink across from him and nods. He says, "I am something of a collector."

Of skeletons, Will thinks. He looks around, worried that they've been made sitting in this pleasant outdoor café.

"There are no cameras around this establishment, Will." Hannibal reads the prop newspaper on their table, angling his head slightly toward a rickety camera across the street. It faces the opposite way. "We are quite alone here."

"Did you case the place, too?" Will asks, finding the page with a huge Sudoku puzzle and sliding it out from between sports and politics with some difficulty.

"No need for that, Will."

Hannibal makes no attempt to set the newspaper down or to hand it off to Will as he struggles to free the page he wants. It's a strangely tame picture they make, Will fiddling with the paper while it's still in Hannibal's hands. Hannibal smirks at him over the economy page when he pulls out a pen to fill in the crossword.

Will ignores him and writes in a few words, scanning down the list for the ones he knows first. He stops on an eleven-letter word for *great soul.*

"Mr. Parish," Hannibal says, voice low.

Will turns and looks over his shoulder at the stout but muscular man hauling out the trash from a side entrance that can be seen from the street. Will sees a flash of lightning in the sky. He counts to twelve before the thunder sounds in response.

“What did he do?” Will asks, keeping his voice at Hannibal’s level.

“Does it matter?”

Will’s not sure how to answer. He could probably save Mr. Parish’s life if he knew what to say, but he really doesn’t.

There’s nothing he can tell about the man just by looking. He’s too far away to see whether his hands are worn from wear and manual labor or if they’re soft and gentle from too much luxury. Will can’t discern from the blank expression on his face whether he enjoys his work or whether he finds it tedious. The man has no discernible history and no future. He’s a ghost, already dead; a marked man.

“In the grand scheme of things, it probably doesn’t.”

Will turns his coffee on the table, the warmth leeching out into his fingers. He hears another crash of thunder.

“You asked to come along, Will,” Hannibal says, setting down the newspaper to brush the backs of Will’s fingers with his knuckles. Will’s stomach flips, and he honestly doesn’t know what triggered it.

He sighs, “I know. I know I did.”

Will chews on the inside of his cheek, eyes trained devoutly on Hannibal’s tie. The deep gray in the sky offsets the paisley cerulean patterns.

“Would you like for me to take you home?”

“No,” Will says, taking his hand away from Hannibal’s fingers. His skin tingles at the loss. He plants his hands on his thighs to keep himself from reaching out against his better judgment. “No, that wouldn’t make any difference. I can’t keep pretending that you’re…”

“That I’m what, Will?”

“That you’re not *doing* this; that you’ll be fine if I just let you have it and don’t participate.”

Hannibal watches Will closely, his hard gaze commanding Will’s full attention. He says, “This isn’t about me.”

“Of course it is,” Will mumbles, swallowing down his fear and tearing his eyes away from the disapproval set in Hannibal’s jaw. He rakes his fingers through his hair and clamps down on his thigh again, not trusting himself to be objective if his hands remain unrestrained. With deeper meaning than he cares to acknowledge, Will says, softly, “Of course it’s about you, Hannibal.”

Will looks back to find the expression on Hannibal’s face totally transformed. The slight downward slant in his mouth is still there, but his eyes brighten by tiny degrees until Will swears they almost glisten as if with tears.

“Magnanimous, Will.”

“What?”

“Sixteen across: magnanimous,” Hannibal says, leaning forward to steal a kiss from Will’s cheek before taking their emptied coffee cups to the trash.

Will shrugs on his jacket as they round the iron railing to make for Hannibal’s car parked across the street. A few raindrops patter around them, falling slightly faster once they start driving. An aria is playing on the radio. Will recognizes it but can’t recall the name. He hums along with the singer under his breath, eyes on the treetops and the sparks of lightning flashing through the sky just above them.

They drive back to Hannibal’s without speaking. Their silence fills the car only a few times in between songs. It doesn’t bother Will as much as he would expect it to.

He walks into the house ahead of Hannibal, carrying in the one grocery bag from their trip to the market before they stopped for coffee. He sets a package of lasagna noodles, a clove of garlic, and a tied bag of tomatoes on the counter, folds the emptied paper bag, and tucks it into the drawer Hannibal keeps them in.

It’s five o’ clock in the afternoon. They sit in Hannibal’s study, and Will stares at the painting on the wall just above Hannibal’s head.

There’s a man on the far left of the composition captured in movement. His one arm is extended as if to reach out for help. Beside him are some sheep, a naked woman, and a male giant touching and sitting over her. Her face is horrified, and Will wonders why.

Hannibal is rearranging the armchairs around a coffee table for a game of chess. Will stands and helps place the pieces on the board. Hannibal plays black like he always does; Will plays white. He thinks it fits given the pelts of their respective stag representations. Hannibal finishes setting up the white pieces while Will situates the last of the black. They sit down across from each other. Will goes first.

Will opens with a pawn to d4, and Hannibal mirrors him, immediately smiling when he realizes what strategy Will is employing. He moves another pawn to c6, declining his Queen’s Gambit.

“Again, Will?”

Will moves a knight to f6, grimacing. He says, “I’ve only done it one other time.”

“You’ve done it twice,” Hannibal says. He moves his knight to f3, another parallel. “The first time I let you have it.”

“What do you mean, you let me? I captured your pawn.”

Will moves his other knight, and Hannibal follows by moving his left hand bishop. Will moves his, too, obligated to mirror Hannibal with his strategy effectively foiled.

“At the loss of how many of your own?” Hannibal smiles at Will’s frown. “It’s a sacrifice I was willing to make.”

Will castles his king and stares at the board, figuring. Hannibal moves his remaining untouched bishop into the knight’s file on Will’s right. Will taps his bishop with the tip of one finger, reconsiders his rook, and moves it to c1. Hannibal studies Will’s move, contemplating with chin in hand. He moves a pawn finally, and Will mechanically tarries with his bishop. The next few moves result in a capture two of Will’s pawns, Hannibal’s knight, and one of his pawns.

Hannibal moves his remaining knight, and Will concentrates on Hannibal’s strategy. He thinks he might be using the Lasker Defense.

“Was it your father who taught you to play chess, Will?”

“Yes,” Will says, moving his bishop. “Stop trying to distract me.”

He watches Hannibal castle his king. He says, “That would not be my first choice for a distraction.”

Will looks up from an unmoved pawn. He moves his rook instead to capture Hannibal’s bishop, which is promptly captured by Hannibal’s knight. They go back and forth, and Will loses two more pawns. He manages to capture Hannibal’s other bishop at the expense of one of his knights.

“Who taught you to play?”

“My uncle did.”

“Not his chef?” Will smiles cheekily, taking a pawn with his bishop.

“Bonaventure was his name.” Hannibal moves his rook to e5. He taps his knee with his fingers in thought, brow furrowed. “He taught me to fish.”

“You fish?”

“I haven’t in some time, but I believe the skill remains with me.”

Will moves his bishop out of the way of Hannibal’s rook, releasing the piece before he notices Hannibal’s knight. He keeps his face blank in hopes that Hannibal won’t see it, but he sees it, of course, and captures it. Will sighs, moves his queen, and looks again to the painting above the fireplace: the man, the woman, and the giant.

He says, “Check.”

Without looking up from their game, Hannibal says, “Norandino and Lucina Discovered by the Ogre; a rendition of the original Lanfranco.” He makes a move and holds his finger on the piece until Will turns to acknowledge it. He moves his knight into the white queen’s path, on the same track where his rook rests prepared to capture her should Will take the bait.

He moves his bishop in retaliation and claims a pawn.

“Why is she afraid of him?” Will asks, watching Hannibal move his queen halfway across the board near his black rook. Hannibal looks up as if surprised at the question.

“I imagine she is afraid because the ogre discovered them, Will.”

Will rolls his eyes, moves his rook near Hannibal’s queen, careful not to sit diagonal or adjacent to the piece. He says, “I got that from the title, thank you.”

“Why do you think she is afraid of him?”

Hannibal watches Will for a moment before moving his piece. Their next moves come in quick succession: black knight takes pawn, white queen takes knight, and black rook takes queen. Will frowns at the aftermath of their scuffle.

“Check,” Hannibal says. He turns to eye the painting as Will scowls at the board. “Do you think there should be more to it than the fact of his monstrosity?”

Will looks up at Hannibal and finds him gazing still at the painting. He forgets the game for a moment.

“I think he probably represents more than just monstrosity.”

Hannibal turns to acknowledge Will. His eyes look lost, murky. He glances down at the board and repeats the statement, “Check.”

Will’s brow wrinkles, and he moves his king out of the way of Hannibal’s rook. He watches, confused, as Hannibal moves his rook into position to take the pawn two moves away from promotion. Will moves his bishop instead, and Hannibal takes it with his queen. Will swears and advances with his pawn, losing a different pawn but claiming another after switching the pawn for his fallen queen.

“What else could the ogre represent, Will?”

He scoops up one of Hannibal’s pawns, scrutinizing Hannibal’s advancing rook.

“Probably the consummation of her marriage to the coward *leaving* her with the ogre.”

Hannibal smiles, some of his mirth renewed. He says, “Norandino, the king of Damascus?”

“Kings can be cowards, too,” Will murmurs. He clocks Hannibal’s king, heavily guarded by the rook and a disposable pawn. The black queen hovers on the side of the board. Softly, he says, “Fear doesn’t discriminate.”

Hannibal moves his rook, and Will moves his queen, inadvertently freeing up a path for Hannibal’s queen to move in and take the final white knight. The last of Will’s immediate defenses falls.

“Checkmate, Will.”

“What? How did you even…?”

“You trap yourself in thoughts of the next move. It prevents you from seeing the move that has just been made,” Hannibal says, sounding very much like a guru. “Contrarily, I can tell when the opposite holds true.”

“Oh, really.”

“Yes, quite.”

“How?” Will asks, folding his arms across his chest and leaning back into the armchair.

Hannibal mimics the action, crossing his legs as he leans back. He looks at ease and professional. Will is sure he looks like a teenager vying with a parent for a later curfew, so he sits up straighter and sets his hands on the armrests. Hannibal smiles, clearly having followed his train of thought.

“You seek to distract yourself when you play in the moment; when you seek to distract me, you think ahead.”

“That’s not—That’s…” Will blinks, rubbing his hand across his chin. “Oh.”

“We’ll need to be going soon, Will,” Hannibal says, leaning forward to collect the pieces from the board. “Do you still wish to come along?”

Will swallows, leans forward to help with the white pieces, and answers in the affirmative. Hannibal asks if he’s sure, and Will tells him he is. He means it, even as he’s terrified that he does.

They walk out of the study together. Hannibal checks his watch, and Will glances at the clock in the kitchen. It’s a quarter to six. Will follows Hannibal into the hallway, fitting his hands into a brand new pair of leather gloves Hannibal bought for him the day before as they descend the stairs into the cellar. He takes the duffel bag Hannibal hands him and peers inside. There are two plastic 2-liters of unopened water, a length of rope, a hunting knife, twine, two changes of clothes, a bone saw, a rib separator, and a bottle of isopropyl alcohol.

Will follows him back up the stairs and out the front door. They load the duffel bag and a large cooler Hannibal carried from the cellar into the trunk of Hannibal’s car. Will looks inside as Hannibal ducks back into the house for his trench coat to combat the rainfall. There’s dry ice, plastic zip baggies, and a glass jar with a strainer fixed to the top.

For the blood, Will thinks. *For Mr. Parish’s blood.*

Hannibal slides his hand across Will’s and shuts the cooler. They watch each other, and Hannibal says, “Fear reaches even kings, Will.”

Will doesn’t have anything to say, so he steps back and rounds the car to slide in on the passenger’s side. Hannibal slams the trunk closed and boards the car from the other side.

They ride back into town in more silence. The radio is tuned to the same station and playing quietly around them. Will doesn't know the song this time. He braves the drive with his eyes closed and his mind focused on nothing but the music, which only works for a short while. Every clash of percussion is a limb severed, and every whisper of the strings is an arterial spray of blood.

He concentrates instead on the crashes of thunder he hears muffled from the other side of the window. He counts them and sets his heart to the uneven tempo of gentle rainfall. Several times he has to regulate his breathing and make a conscious effort not to jump out of the car. They slow to a stop, and Hannibal kills the engine.

"Here we are," he says, unbuckling his seatbelt.

Will looks, and they're off one of the exits of the Baltimore Beltway. The rain has stopped falling here, but the sky is still dark. Will rolls his window down, and the breeze is cool and revitalizing. Hannibal takes out a map and unfolds it over the steering wheel.

A few minutes pass by like this, and Will asks, "What are we doing here?"

"Mr. Parish uses this exit to get home."

"Why don't you just drive to his house if you know where it is?"

"He won't get that far."

"How do you know?" Will thinks about it, unbuckles his seatbelt, and turns so his back is to the open window. He asks, "Did you sabotage his car?"

"Why did you think we stopped for coffee, Will?"

"What did you do, punch a hole in the radiator?"

"I knocked the wires attached to the battery loose." Hannibal runs his hands down the edges of the map, smoothing them down. "He should notice some trouble on the interstate and stop somewhere further down the road."

"You don't think it's risky to do this in broad daylight?"

"There is always risk inherent in this type of work."

"Is this risk worth taking?"

Hannibal looks at Will, smiles, and says, "You were always worth the risk, Will."

The bottom drops out. Will's fear becomes something he can't name in specific terms or singular emotions. It's wasps, and it's a typhoon, and it's a forest fire; it's turbulence and destruction. It's all things that can wound but are themselves indifferent to the chaos they send the same way God sends His angels.

Will feels himself smiling and allowing Hannibal to take his hand. He hears him say, “We’re meant to do this, Will.”

Without really thinking about the consequences, Will says, “I know we are.”

Hannibal leans across the seats to kiss Will, and they hold like that for a count of five before Will puts his hands in Hannibal’s hair and abandons his mission to compartmentalize this experience that Hannibal is gifting him with. Kings can fear, and Hannibal can fear, but Will can make the choice today to leave his behind. He can leave it all behind and be what Hannibal always needed him to be for them to have any kind of chance together.

A set of tires flies passed on the road. Their lips separate, and Will watches the red Corolla speed down the asphalt and disappear beyond the curve of trees. Hannibal smiles, fingers squeezing at the back of Will’s neck.

Will says, “That’s our ride.”

“Yes, it is.” Hannibal grins and starts the car after buckling his seatbelt. Will buckles his, too. “Would you like to be the one to kill him, Will?”

Will thinks about it and says, “I want to watch you do it.”

They drive about five minutes down the desolate road and find the red car pulled over onto the shoulder along the trees, smoking. Mr. Parish is holding his cell phone in the air trying to get service. Hannibal really planned this chase down to the tee. He waves them down and goes so far as to stand in front of the car to force them to stop.

He jogs over to Will’s window, still opened from earlier. He says, “Jesus, I’m glad you guys were passing through. Either of you get service out here?”

Will makes a show of checking his cell and finds two bars on the screen. He frowns and shakes his head, looking at Hannibal as he pockets his phone.

“What seems to be the problem?” Hannibal asks, engine idling.

“Oh, man, I don’t know. I was just driving home from work, and my car kicked off on me. It was fine this morning.”

“Well, if it’s a mechanical problem,” Will starts, looking from Mr. Parish to Hannibal and back. “I mean, I used to work on boat motors. I could take a look.”

Mr. Parish laughs and says, “You’re a Godsend. Thank you so much.”

Hannibal nods and pulls the car around in front of the red Corolla, parks, and kills the engine. They look at Mr. Parish, briefly, in the rearview mirror. Hannibal says, “Don’t open the hood until I give sign that the roads are clear.”

“How will you do it so he doesn’t know?”

“I could sneeze,” Hannibal says, unbuckling his seatbelt.

Will goes to open his door but stops, grabbing Hannibal's arm. He says, "I don't think I've ever heard you sneeze before."

"Here's your chance," Hannibal says around his smirk.

He gets out of the car, and Will follows, unzipping his jacket and letting the cool air seep under his shirts to shock his pounding heart with the change in temperature. Hannibal hangs back slightly at Will's shoulder, watching for cars. The view from I-695 is totally obscured by trees and abandoned warehouses.

Will rubs his gloved hands together, extending his right when Mr. Parish goes to shake his hand. He says, "I'm Gilbert Parish."

"Will Graham."

It doesn't matter that it's his real name because Gilbert Parish is going to die today. It doesn't even matter that his voice trembles with both dread and excitement.

"This is really a great help, thanks."

Will smiles and says, "I don't know if I can help you yet."

"Well, let me pop the hood."

Hannibal sneezes, and Mr. Gilbert Parish says, "Bless you."

Will looks over his shoulder, and Hannibal nods. Will props the hood up with the stand, notes the unplugged wires to the battery, and waves Mr. Parish over. He probably didn't even check for himself to see what was wrong.

Entertained by the circumstances and rattled with nerves, Will laughs and takes Mr. Parish's shoulder with his hand. He says, "Somebody tampered with your car, Mr. Parish."

The man looks shocked, even frightened. He looks down and sees the wires when Will gestures to them.

"Oh, my God," He says, starting to back away from Will. "Who would do that?"

Will looks over Mr. Parish's shoulder and smiles at Hannibal. He says, "We might."

"What?"

Hannibal takes advantage of his confusion and spins him ninety degrees to land a hard hit to his solar plexus. Mr. Parish sucks in a strained, desperate breath and clambers into the road to run from Hannibal. Will watches for a moment before leaning over to reposition the freed wires into the sockets of the car battery. The alternator is beat to hell; it's probably why Hannibal went for the battery. He closes the hood, and Hannibal drags Mr. Parish back to the side of the road by his arm, which he twists to dislocate the shoulder.

Hannibal flips the man onto his stomach and binds his arms with some of the copper twine from the duffel bag he had stashed in his coat pocket. He unwinds a thick coil of rope and wraps it twice around Mr. Parish's head after stuffing a golf ball into his mouth.

"Load him into his car or yours?" Will asks, leaning against the car's hood.

"His, I think."

Will unlocks the trunk with Mr. Parish's keys, and they load the squirming man into the car. Here Hannibal binds his feet and hog ties the man, which must be especially painful given Mr. Parish's shoulder. They slam the trunk closed together, and Will follows Hannibal down the road ten minutes before turning down into the woods. The alternator may be shot, but the car drives pretty smoothly, even in rougher terrain. It calms his jittering insides just slightly.

They drive for ten more minutes, and the rain has picked up to a soft drizzle. Will manually rolls down the window, and some of the underbrush sweeps across his cheek. They stop after twenty minutes of driving, completely submerged in the forest by now. Hannibal has to know that it's hunting season; has to see the potential danger in coming out here, though the sun will set soon.

Will gets out of the car and looks around. He doesn't hear anything but the soft patter of raindrops on the strewn leaves underfoot. They don't crunch when tread upon.

Hannibal opens the trunk and unzips the duffel bag. He removes the rope and throws it up over the high branches of a tree, twisting the rope about his arms and hoisting himself up to check the strength of the branches. They hold him, and for a few moments, Hannibal stays suspended several inches off the ground. Will can see the ropes securing him in place, but Will swears it looks as if Hannibal is floating all on his own.

He drops back to the ground and makes for the trunk of Mr. Parish's car. He enlists Will's help in lugging him toward the tree and then in untying the ropes binding his feet to his wrists. His legs fall weakly to the floor and before his body can recover from the stiffness set in his limbs, Hannibal strings him up around and behind his shoulders.

Mr. Parish flails weakly, arms still bound behind his back. He sputters around the gag in his mouth and sobs, knowing now, if he didn't before, what is happening to him.

It begins to sink in for Will, too. Jack will find this man's body, wherever Hannibal decides to leave it, and probably never be able to trace it back to this isolated corner of the woods. Jack will ask him to reconstruct the murder, he'll ask him to get in Hannibal's head, and he'll ask him, *What do you see?*

Noise fills Will's ears; his heartbeat rages against his ribs like a horse's hooves galloping across stone, and his blood rushes in his ears like the torrent of a flashflood. He closes his eyes and listens to Hannibal shuffling beside him, blocking out the sounds of Mr. Parish thrashing against his bonds. Will's feet carry him towards Hannibal's warm, constant presence like a photon in a beam of sunlight drawn to an opening flower, like a moth intoxicated by a fatal lick of flame.

He throws his arms around Hannibal's waist and holds on, and he can't explain how he got there or why he thought it would be okay, but Hannibal holds him back. He stops trying to find a way to make sense of it and just buries his face in Hannibal's neck.

Panicked, he says, "I don't know, I don't know."

Hannibal brushes his fingers through Will's hair, warm leather grazing against his scalp. He kisses Will's temple and says, "Do you know why I love you, Will?"

"Because I…" Will swallows around the breath that catches in his throat. "Because I see you; because there's no one else like me."

"The two are one and the same," Hannibal whispers. Will only just hears him over Mr. Parish's hysterics. "We are one and the same." He kisses Will gently on the lips and once more when Will doesn't turn away from him.

"You told me you weren't a narcissist," Will mumbles, comforted and rejuvenated by Hannibal's closeness, by the firewood and cardamom smell of him, by the way his fingers curve against Will's back.

"I'm not." Hannibal pulls away to look Will in the eye. He says, "We are kindred spirits, you and I." He presses their foreheads together, and Will's eyes slip closed. "We are claimed for each other and for this life." He gestures to the hunting knife in his hand that Will notices for the first time. He runs his finger along the side of the blade.

I should have killed you when I had the chance. I should have saved myself. I should have run from you.

"I love you," Will says with his eyes on the knife. His hand trails up to Hannibal's wrist and halts, fingers creating a link around the joint. "Tell me you love me." He looks into Hannibal's eyes, and Hannibal says it.

He says, "I love you, Will."

Will brings him down for a kiss, and they lose themselves momentarily to the lust roiling in their blood. The tip of the knife nudges at Will through his jacket where Hannibal's arm has wrapped around his waist.

"What can I do?"

Hannibal hands him the glass jar with the strainer fixed on top and instructs him to place it beneath Mr. Parish's feet after removing the man's socks and shoes. Will's phone rings in his pocket, and Mr. Parish's horror at the sound of his obviously functional cell phone is far greater than his horror at being tied up like an animal about to be slaughtered. Will checks the screen. Alana is calling him.

"Should I get it?"

"One moment, Will."

Hannibal jams the knife in the center of Mr. Parish's thigh, spearing the artery beneath the skin. Mr. Parish jerks once, twice, and falls still after a prolonged moment of compressed vitality and neglected urgency. His silence is truly deafening. The blood runs in angry frantic lines down the instep of his trembling foot and off his toes into the clean empty jar.

Will is faintly aware of the phone leaving his hands as Hannibal's fingers gently pluck it out of his grasp. As if through a wind tunnel, he hears Hannibal say, "Hello, Alana."

Hannibal shoulders the phone and speaks conversationally to Alana on the phone. He tells her Will is in the shower and that she can call back later. He says this as he's cutting open Mr. Parish's shirt with the bloody knife. The call ends fairly quickly with Hannibal smiling and tucking the phone back into Will's pocket. Not a drop of blood has spilled on him.

He says, "She called to see how you were recovering from your concussion."

"Oh," Will mumbles, eyes fixed still on the steady flow of blood.

"I assured her you were fine. No post-traumatic seizures and no signs of lasting brain injury."

"Signs of lasting brain injury," Will echoes, approaching Mr. Parish's feebly twitching body. His complexion is paling; his muscular frame is sagged and waning. Hannibal moves away to set his coat and jacket into the backseat of his car. Will follows and taps his finger on the knot of Hannibal's blue tie. "I like this tie."

Hannibal smiles and loosens it, dropping it and his vest into the backseat. Will removes his jacket, too, and lays it on the seat beside Hannibal's coat.

They walk back to the bleeding man, some of his blood gushing down over the sides of the glass with Mr. Parish's increasingly sporadic spasms. The jar is almost full. Will drops the duffel bag at their feet by the cooler Hannibal took down from the car.

Hannibal rolls up his sleeves and presses the tip of the knife against the center of the man's chest. He murmurs, "Do you know of the tradition where the hunter eats the still-warm heart of his first kill, Will?"

His mind flashes back to Yusuf Vartanian's body in the field. He remembers recreated points of starlight and bursts of flavor and sparks of sensation in his fingers and down his spine. He remembers Hannibal feeding him, and he remembers feeding Hannibal.

Hannibal carves the knife into the man's chest; his face is an emotionless slate of clinical concentration. He carves into the chest cavity, and Mr. Parish's limp body issues a pathetic whining sound from behind the gag. Hannibal bends down to retrieve the bone saw and cuts through the sternum with it. The grating sound drives deeply into Will's brain like a needle. Mr. Parish's legs twitch violently before his body is rendered permanently still.

Hannibal separates the ribs with the glinting silver tool, and Will holds it in place. Hannibal is pressing something hot and slick against Will's bottom lip; he's saying, "Open."

Will does, and he remembers communion. Blood erupts on his tongue; he tastes salt and metal and lively meat.

The present scene resurfaces in his mind. Mr. Parish's chest is cracked open, his heart is in Hannibal's black-gloved hand, and there is blood in Will's mouth. He chews on the sliver in his mouth when he sees Hannibal peeling back another piece for himself. He grinds it again and again with his teeth until his jaw hurts. He watches Hannibal swallow and likewise consumes the morsel.

He imagines it, he knows he does, but it tastes just like Quiche Lorraine and cream and lox. It tastes like Hannibal's tongue. It tastes exactly like Hannibal feels.

It's life and exuberance and abundance and survival; it's survival above all things. It's the will to live through extreme pain and unfathomable grief and sadness. It's the power to conquer fear in conquering others. It is their rhapsody to each other, their very own serenade.

Will helps Hannibal remove the organs as the final streaks of the sunset cast bloody reels across the fading canvas of a dark teal sky. Hannibal bags them, twists the lid onto the jar overflowing with blood, and rinses everything down with one of the plastic containers of water before placing the items in the cooler. He takes the rope down from the tree and tosses it in the trunk of Mr. Parish's car along with the splayed, emptied body of Mr. Parish himself. Hannibal removed his arms, too, for the cuts of shoulder.

He knocks the cooler closed with his elbow and rolls the wet gloves down his fingers. He opens the other 2-liter, drinks from it, and hands it to Will once he's disposed of his bloodied gloves, too. He takes the water, eyes set firmly on Hannibal's ruined gray shirt. There's blood and dirt all over it. Hannibal takes the water, caps it, and tucks it back into the duffel bag. He pours the antiseptic over the rib separator and the hunting knife before wiping them down with a handkerchief and returning them to the duffel bag. He tucks the handkerchief into the garbage bag containing their gloves and goes to remove his bloodstained shirt.

Will stops him, pressing his hand to the soaked through material and transferring the blood onto his palm and fingers. He squeezes, the blood sinking beneath his nails and running down the back of his hand and forearm to stop at the muddied cuff of his rolled up sleeve. They're filthy, they're interlocked, and they're mated.

His hand tracks up behind Hannibal's ear into his hair, leaving a trail of blood on the side of Hannibal's neck. He slides his other hand up to drag his red fingers from Hannibal's temple to his cheekbone. He brushes his thumb across Hannibal's lip, smudging it with red. Will surges forward and takes that stain with his tongue, cleans it, and moans around the taste of it on his tongue. His fingers twist against Hannibal's scalp and tilt his head back so Will can claim every part of his mouth that he can reach with his tongue.

"Make love to me," he whispers, hand falling from Hannibal's hair to pull apart the final buttons of his shirt.

Hannibal pulls Will against him and bunches his hands up the back of Will's shirt so it comes untucked. He fumbles for a moment with Will's belt, and they sink down together onto the wet earth blanketed in flimsy wet leaves. Will bunches a few in his fingers; soft and smooth

like antler velvet against his skin. He lays his head back and observes the sky, tinted a navy blue now with nightfall. He sucks on Hannibal's fingers when they are presented to him, wetting them with his spit.

Hannibal wrestles his pants down around his ankles and slips those fingers inside of Will once, twice, kisses Will's throat, and frees himself from his pants, pushing them and his boxers down his thighs. Will spits in Hannibal's hand and watches, enraptured, as Hannibal strokes himself with his hand a few times to spread it from the tip down the shaft.

Will spreads his legs wider and pulls Hannibal closer before he's even begun to push into him. Their bodies are aligned when Hannibal does. The cooled blood on their shirts contrasts with the raging heat generated in their skin.

Hannibal twists out of his shirt in one gorgeous motion. He forces Will's shirt over his head and to the side, and they fuck, slowly, hips rolling in perfect synch and chests heaving with the strain of containing the fire burning between them everywhere they touch.

Hannibal groans into Will's throat, biting his Adam's apple and winding his arm beneath Will's back like he did the first time they were together like this.

"Oh, God," Will mumbles, toeing frantically at his shoes.

Hannibal pushes his knees up to his chest and lays his body back against Will's, trapping his legs as wide as they'll go and forcing his hips to come up at an angle. Will moans, fisting his hands in Hannibal's hair and digging his shoulders into the moist dirt at his back. Hannibal shifts his hips and moves in slowly, tapping just so at Will's prostate and forcing his body into an arc of tantalizing ecstasy from the crown of his head to his tailbone.

Will clutches at Hannibal's bare shoulder blades with one hand and flies out to clutch at the muddy earth for some kind of leverage. The sensuous rhythm of their undulating bodies combined with the subdued sounds of Hannibal's pleasure vibrating at the base of his jaw and against his throat sets Will's blood boiling.

"Tell me, Will."

"I love you," Will mumbles, intoxicated and ravished and rocking back and forth on and against Hannibal's beautiful body. "I love you, only you."

He tries to remember the Lithuanian Hannibal mumbled under his breath. He says, "Mano tik…tobulite?"

Hannibal's answering laugh is more a surprising aphrodisiac than it is a blow to Will's confidence. Hannibal murmurs, "You're very close, Will."

"I am, I'm close," Will gasps, body trembling with the promise of orgasm. He clings to Hannibal's shoulders with both hands now, one caked with blood around the knuckles and one totally saturated in mud. He squeezes the back of Hannibal's neck with his bloodied hand and brings him in for a wet, open-mouthed kiss. A high sound like a mewl bubbles up in Will's throat. He drops his head back, remembering the phrase: "Aš tavo."

Hannibal stills for just a fraction of a heartbeat. Will shifts his hips against Hannibal's and groans, "Aš tave myliu."

A hand finds its way into Will's hair and holds while the other winds around Will's thigh. Hannibal mouths at Will's neck and breathes something against Will's skin that he can't possibly make sense of. Hannibal finds Will's ear and nips, breath gone ragged and hips beginning to snap more erratically.

"Tik gulbės pieno trūksta," Hannibal murmurs, biting Will's ear lobe almost hard enough to hurt.

His hips snap forward, and Will cries out in anguish and elation to have his prostate stricken yet again. Hannibal repeats the action and whispers for Will to touch himself.

Immensely turned on and distressed at the proximity of a world-shattering climax, Will's hand shoots down and furiously works at his painfully hard dick. The rhythm of his hips falters with the tremors knocking through his body. Hannibal holds onto him and fixes the rhythm even as Will loses himself to the feeling of every soggy leaf pinched and adhered to his hot sweating body, every suggestion of a raindrop that falls from either the last few rainclouds left in the darkened sky or from the trees above them, and Hannibal's skin on his skin brushing and sliding and baring down.

Hannibal's tongue presses passed Will's lips and maps out the inside of his mouth, leaving sharp grunts against Will's lips as his hips plow into Will's harder and harder.

Will knows Hannibal is close when his every exhale is timed to the sharp smack of his skin against Will's. Will squeezes his eyes shut and pumps himself a few more times before his whole body tenses and then shivers with the white hot flash of his orgasm as it tears through him and rips a scream clean out of his lungs. His body thrums with an unmovable, unbreakable stillness, even as Hannibal continues to slam into him, deep moan devolving into breathless gasps.

Weakly, he clings to Hannibal's back with one hand; that hand migrates to the nape of his neck and soothes at the feverish flesh there beneath the hairline. He whispers hoarsely, "Come on, baby. Come for me."

Hannibal releases an agonized groan sounding as if his orgasm were ripped from his bones as tangibly as flesh would be ripped from them. His hips jerk twice and stall deep inside of Will. He drops his head onto Will's chest and whimpers, clinging still to Will's hips and digging his nails into Will's scalp. He removes his fingers from Will's hair to clutch at Will's flank instead. His body collapses on top of Will's, the muscles across his back taut with strain and his shoulders hunched slightly.

Will relaxes when Hannibal begins to come back to himself and continues to twist his fingers in Hannibal's hair. He sighs and nuzzles in against Hannibal's jaw and cheek. He thinks it might be blood or earth that wets his nose, but he looks and sees that Hannibal's cheeks are streaked with two lines of tears.

“Whoa, hey.” Will swipes at one of the streaks with his thumb and cuts the other one off where it’s run down to Hannibal’s jaw. “What’s wrong?”

Hannibal laughs softly, shakes his head, and kisses Will’s cheek and eye brow and forehead. He says, “Nothing, Will; nothing, brangiojite.”

Will laughs and tightens his hold around Hannibal’s back with his arms. They lie together and laugh softly into each other’s warm but cooling flesh.

When Will feels slightly more coherent, he asks, “Um, what did I say to you?”

A chuckle rumbles through Hannibal’s chest. He props himself up on his elbows, a teasing smirk on his supple pouted lips.

“Do you not know?”

Will feels his face grow warm, though Hannibal doesn’t acknowledge it. It’s too dark for him to see it creeping across Will’s nose and down his neck.

“I know *aš tave myliu.*”

“You also said you were mine,” Hannibal murmurs, nosing at Will’s neck and angling his hips to pull out. Will shivers at the cold and straightens his legs out to ease the stiffness in his joints. Hannibal rolls over onto his back beside Will, and they look up at the sky. Hannibal says, “There were two other phrases you confused.”

“Which ones?” Will asks, finding Boötes and his two dogs in the sky.

“You said, *my only perfect*.”

Will laughs, scrubbing the back of his hand across his forehead, realizing too late that it’s covered in dried blood. He sighs and lays his head back, resting his hands on his stomach.

“I guess we need to deal with Parish,” Will murmurs, eyes on the heavens.

Hannibal’s fingers track along Will’s stomach, disturbing the semen beginning to cool there. He licks it off his bloodied fingers and bends over Will’s side to lap at it with his tongue. Against Will’s skin he says, “We have some time yet, Will.”

“How much?”

“At least until sunrise.”

“No, I mean…” Will pushes up on his elbows and looks at Hannibal. “How much time do we have?”

“Who do you think would stop us, Will?” Hannibal sits up beside him, a serious expression on his face. “Do you think I would let anyone take you from me?”

There's a threat there lodged in between the affection and the gratitude, a mild rage that burns and lashes at Hannibal's insides. Will can feel it rapping against his ribs, stirring ripples in his heart, and unsettling his blood. He closes his eyes and thinks around it, thinks through and within it, until that visceral emotion is him; until it swallows up his conscious mind so fully that there is no room for doubt, fear, or sorrow. There's no room inside him to mourn whatever semblance of purity he lost out here in the woods today.

He mourns nothing, and he weeps for no one, especially not for Mr. Parish. Hannibal takes his hand in his and presses his lips to his knuckles, lapping gently at the blood caked on his skin.

"Mano gėlyte, Will."

The familiar ring of the language and the way it makes its home in Hannibal's accent brings a slow creeping smile to Will's face. He turns and brushes his forehead against Hannibal's hair. He shakes his head and whispers, "You could be calling me a horse, and I would never know."

"Gėlyte is flower."

Will laughs and winds an arm around Hannibal's stomach, holding onto his ribs and letting him guide them back down to the wet but comfortable ground.

"And you object to being called *baby,*" Will teases. He nips at Hannibal's earlobe.

"I never objected to it." Hannibal squeezes Will's arm once. "I find it quite endearing."

Will smiles and says, "Then I'll gladly take *flower.*"

He takes one of Hannibal's fingers into his mouth and sucks the blood from it. He associates the metallic tang of it with the open air and fresh rain. He associates it with Hannibal holding him and calling him *flower* in his mother tongue.

"You never fail to surprise me, Will."

"I should hope not," Will murmurs when Hannibal withdraws his hand. He runs his fingers through Will's hair and kisses him.

The iridescent moon hangs behind the shroud of trees, brightening the farthest portion of the sky like a light seen through a veil of sheer fabric. Will eases his head onto Hannibal's chest, and they lie together in the mud and leaves and filtered moonlight.

Mr. Gilbert Parish is dead in the trunk of his car, and his organs are hidden away in a cooler. Will helped end him, helped destroy all that he could be and that he could lend to the world.

He traded a white pawn for a black queen; there was no contest, really. It's a sacrifice he was willing, even eager, to make. He would make it again and again, a hundred times over, just to see Hannibal pleased and sated and happy. He would torch the world and all its beauty to bring Hannibal peace.

He holds the man tighter in his arms and sinks into a calm bliss the likes of which he's never known before. It doesn't come from Hannibal; it comes from Will.

Hannibal feels it, too. Will can tell by the way Hannibal leans down and kisses his forehead, murmuring, "Aš tave myliu, aš tave myliu."

Chapter End Notes

Giovanni Lanfranco's Norandino and Lucinda Discovered by the Ogre
http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/l/lanfranc/norandin.html

Black and White Alabaster Chess Set
http://pebblez.com/pictures/alabaster-marble-chess/Alabaster-Marble-Chess/705/MF1BK.jpg

Chess game based on Anand's Lasker Defense against Topalov (World Chess Championship 2011)
http://www.chess.com/article/view/anands-lasker-defence-against-topalov

--
Thanks to solitary_thrush for telling me how to bleed *deer* and for letting me in on the hunting tradition employed right before sexy times ensued. ;D

Also, you guys should go read Au Jus by cognomen. Something similar to the heart thing happens, and it's delicious and wonderful.

**The Lithuanian expression, "only swan's milk is missing" just means everything is in abundance and nothing is missing.

Twentieth Century Fox

Chapter Summary

Our Queen works the Ripper case.

Chapter Notes

She's the queen of cool, and she's the lady who waits/Since her mind left school, it never hesitates/She won't waste time on elementary talk/'Cause she's a Twentieth Century Fox

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Beverly gets the call at five in the morning as she's getting dressed for work. She angles her head to the side to hold the phone and wriggles into her pants. She says, "Katz."

"Beverly, it's Jack. We got a call for a body, down in Towson. Are you in Quantico yet?"

"No, I'm home. What kind of body do we have in Towson?"

"A hollowed out bookkeeper, formerly known as Gilbert Parish, strapped to the hood of his car like a deer."

She runs her fingers through her wet hair to brush out a few of the knots and asks, "Do you think it's the Ripper?"

"I'll call Will to have him check, but I want him to see it before I speculate."

"You're speculating already," Beverly says, slipping on a pair of black two-inch heels. She swaps them out for a dark gray pair of boots. She kicks them off, adds socks, and then fits them back onto her feet. "You get that solemn disciplinary tone of voice when you think it's the Ripper."

"Just get out here as soon as you can," Jack huffs. "I'm texting you the directions."

"All right, Jack."

She runs her hair through with a comb and blow dryer and works quickly with hairspray and eye shadow. She takes up her purse and keys and skips out into the kitchen for a bagel. While it toasts, she starts a pot of coffee. Beverly is halfway through one bagel slice when her roommate zombie walks in from the hall and falls into a stool at the counter. She grumbles, "How can you be a morning person?"

“Evolutionary adaptation to my work,” Beverly answers around a bite of her bagel. “Did you get called in today?”

Saskia groans and pillows her arms on the table to rest her head. Her wheat blonde hair pokes out at various frazzled angles, and her turquoise scrubs are wrinkled and papery. Muffled, she says, “Yes.”

“You want me to make you a bagel?”

“Yes,” she says again, slumping further into the counter.

Saskia worked a late shift last night at the Saratoga Medical Clinic and stumbled back into the apartment at around midnight. Beverly’s in a hurry, but she also feels the need to help her friend, so she turns to the counter for the deli bag of poppy seed bagels and gets to it.

She holds her bagel in between her teeth and places two more slices into the toaster. She takes a bite, sets it on the counter, and pours Saskia a cup of coffee with one cream and two sugars. She carries the plated bagel, the tub of cream cheese, and a butter knife to her sleepy friend, making another trip for the steaming mug of coffee. She fixes herself a thermos of coffee, too, with one sugar and no cream. She checks her watch, shrugs on her jacket, and eats the last of her bagel as she heads out the door.

“Drink your coffee before you get on the roads, Saskia.”

Beverly jogs out to the car and burns her tongue on the coffee. It’s still way too hot, so she leaves it in the cup holder for the duration of the hour and a half drive from Springfield into Towson. She changes the radio a few times and hums along with the Beatles song she happens to stumble upon. During a commercial break she finds a jazz station playing Blue in Green and listens to it as she sorts through Jack’s directions on the shoulder of the road.

If they are dealing with the Ripper, there will be one more murder before the end of next week. She doesn’t like to think it’ll come to that, but it always has in the past.

She takes the Beltway to the exit for the city of Towson and drives ten more minutes to Lake Roland. She knows she’s close when she drives up around a bend in the trees and the sight of squad cars rises up to greet her.

Beverly parks her car on the side of the road and walks up on the scene, stepping carefully through the mud. Baltimore got a lot of rain last night. She hopes it didn’t do too good a job of washing away the evidence, if the killer left any behind. She holds out hope, but if it is the Ripper, it’s likely they won’t find anything even minutely useful.

She walks around the yellow tape and finds Jack bundled up in a coat that looks too warm for the weather. He seems paler than usual. She looks at the crime scene instead of at him and can see from their distance just over Will’s head that the arms have been amputated and the body flayed open.

“So is it him?”

Jack shrugs and says, “It’s pretty damned artistic. Even I can attest to that.”

They watch Will stand before the red car with all four doors flung open and the windshield shattered to spray the mucked up earth with a spectral bedding of broken glass. His arms are down, bent slightly at the elbow, and fingers twitching with imagined movement. He doesn’t move otherwise.

A crack of thunder sounds above them, and Jack sighs.

“Will’s been standing there for almost ten minutes.”

“You aren’t gonna stop him?”

Beverly fits her hands into a latex pair of gloves Jack hands her. He shakes his head.

“Dr. Lecter’s watching him,” Jack says with apathy. Beverly notices Lecter then, standing off to the side with his hands tucked into his coat pockets and his collar turned up. As if he is aware of the attention being allotted to him, he angles his head to the side, nods in their direction, and waves cordially to Beverly. She waves back and sips on her coffee, right about at the optimum temperature now.

“Is Dr. Lecter consulting on this case?”

“He came with Will to drop him off. I asked him to stay.”

Jack nods his head toward a trail to their right, and Beverly follows his lead. In explanation, he says, “Zeller and Price swept the scene before Will and Dr. Lecter got here. Zeller said he might have something for you.”

She hears Zeller’s voice before she sees him. They get a little closer, and Beverly can make out that he’s talking, animatedly, about biblical examples of dismemberment. He strays off that particular tangent and branches into the Egyptian myth of Set and Osiris right as she and Jack round the curve in the trail to find them situated in front of Price’s laptop. He has it set up on the hood of a big black SUV.

They duck under a few low-reaching branches, and Price turns at the sound of their approaching footsteps. Zeller notices them a moment later.

“Does Bowman know you use his baby as a desk?” Beverly asks, in jest. Price smiles, tired; the answer is no.

“Zeller,” Jack prompts.

“Oh, right.” He reaches into his pocket and produces a vial containing a tiny splinter. “It’s not really my thing, but we found that in what’s left of the windshield.”

Katz examines it and says, “Blunt wooden object; maybe traces of fibers in the sliver?” Zeller nods and Beverly pockets the vial. To Jack she says, “I’ll have to process it in the lab. We are in the middle of a wooded area.”

“It’s worth a shot,” Zeller mumbles, stepping around Beverly to peer out into the road. “Is the maven done yet?”

“Maven,” Price scoffs, not pretentiously.

“Last we saw, he’s still under,” Jack mutters, striding up to Price’s computer. Beverly walks back onto the trail to head back to the road and hears him say to Price, “Tell me you found usable prints.”

“None that don’t belong to Gilbert Parish or a Monica Faber. That’s his sister, married.”

Their voices fade completely once Beverly makes it back onto the pavement. She walks toward the yellow tape that divides the road at the point where the asphalt cuts off into the wet brown-black mud. She ducks under the cautionary banner and comes to stand beside Dr. Lecter.

He turns his head slightly to her in acknowledgement but doesn’t take his eyes away from Will. Beverly looks, and his hands are still the only mobile parts of him.

“This can’t be good for Will,” Beverly says, burying her own hands deep in her pockets. “I think it’s getting to him—being in the field, I mean.”

“Why do you say that?”

“The last time he had to confirm a Ripper kill he got sick at the scene.”

This catches Lecter’s attention. He looks at her fully, and the slightest furrow mars his brow.

“Did he?” Beverly nods, and he looks back to Will, murmuring thoughtfully, “He never told me.”

“Oh.” She looks at Will, too. “He probably just didn’t want to mix business. You’re not his psychiatrist anymore, right?” He shakes his head, and she continues, “It doesn’t make for the best pillow talk.”

The head of the corpse was placed over the roof of the car so that the throat was extended and the ghoulish face left at the mercy of gravity. Its gray unseeing eyes watch Will in a frightening dead stare.

Will’s arms drop to his sides, and his head falls forward with a heavy sigh. Dr. Lecter doesn’t move to go to him, so Beverly stays rooted where she is, watching Will closely for any indications that he might not be okay. He puts his hands in his hair, bunches his shoulders up, and turns to face Dr. Lecter, surprised to see Beverly standing with him. He drops his arms and sniffles. His face is pinked as if he’s been running.

“Hey, Katz.”

“Hey, Will.”

She meets him halfway, and he mumbles brokenly, “Sorry about that.”

“You’re good. I just got here.”

He heaves another sigh. The skin right underneath his eyes is shiny. To Dr. Lecter, he asks, “How long was I standing there?”

“Just over fifteen minutes, Will,” Dr. Lecter says, tucking his hand back into his pocket.

“Damn,” he swears again under his breath and wipes the back of his wrist across his mouth. His voice trembles. “Why didn’t you snap me out of it?”

“I was enjoying watching you,” Dr. Lecter admits, almost cheekily.

Will glares at him, looking not at all threatening. A faint reddish hue crosses the bridge of his nose. Will walks off, muttering something Beverly can’t hear to the doctor following at his heels. She made a conscious decision to trust Dr. Lecter in Williamsport after Will’s seizure, so she has to believe that if he doesn’t find anything wrong with Will’s behavior, he must be okay.

She watches them go for a moment longer before turning to face the crime scene. A few flies buzz around the snapped open ribcage. There’s no blood anywhere on the car, so the murder, and the organ removal, had to have happened somewhere else. The body strapped to the roof of the car emits the foul, sickly sweet stench of putrescine and cadaverine.

Jack also said the car belonged to Gilbert Parish. His killer must have hijacked his car at some point. It’s interesting to her the way the body was left; the placement of the head above everything else.

She rounds the car again and looks at the victim’s face. There are faint rope burns on the cheeks.

Standing where Will was standing to examine the marks on the dead man’s face, Beverly realizes what disturbs her so much about the positioning of the head.

It was arranged this way specifically so the person in observance would be forced to make eye contact with the corpse. The killer is mocking them, more deliberately this time than in the past; the unseeing eyes, the dismembered arms. It’s a taunt.

Beverly shivers and walks back around the car to escape that empty gaze. Zeller and Price emerge from the trees and cross the police tape to look at the body, too.

Hushed, Zeller says, “Jack’s letting into Will.”

“About what?” Beverly scrunches up her nose, taking the camera one of the techs hands her.

“What else?” Zeller shrugs, taking a sample of the blood from the inside of the victim’s chest cavity.

Price kneels beside the driver’s side door and sweeps the steering wheel, gear shift, and seatbelt for any prints he might’ve missed in his cursory sweep. Beverly can tell he comes up

with nothing when he moves on from the door to the backseat to the trunk with increasingly frustrated expressions on his face.

“Will told him it’s the Ripper just like Jack wanted him to,” Price mumbles. He pulls a face at having to approach the cadaver’s face to look in the trunk.

“And Jack, oddly enough, wasn’t very happy to have his own theory confirmed.”

“I’ve got a hair back here,” Price announces, holding it up with a pair of tweezers. Zeller goes to collect it.

He continues, “I don’t know what he expects Will to do after a certain point.”

“Just so we’re clear, you are defending Will, right?” Beverly says, photographing the stab wound in the victim’s left thigh.

“Well, when you put it like that,” Zeller says sarcastically.

“Oh, come off it, Brian.” Price straightens out, flinches when the victim’s face lines up with his, and shakes his head.

“What?” Zeller shrugs, stooping to collect soil samples. “All I’m saying is, Will’s got a good thing going for him most days, but he can’t just make himself see all the answers when he wants to. Jack should cut the guy a break just this once.”

“I certainly wouldn’t mind not having to work this guy’s crime scenes anymore.”

“This isn’t even a crime scene,” Zeller complains, shaking his soil sample in its plastic cup and looking around at the trees. “No blood anywhere, not even on the car.”

“There’s some in the trunk,” Price says, waving a cotton swab again for Zeller to take and bag. “That’s got to tell us something that the other crime scenes didn’t. The last victim was killed and mounted fifty yards from where he left his car on the road. How did the vic’s car get here?”

“Ripper got our guy to give him a ride somewhere, a la Edmund Kemper?” Zeller offers, bending down to peer into the trunk.

“What if someone else drove Gilbert Parish’s car?” Beverly asks slowly, straightening out. “Ripper followed after so there’d be a way to leave this car and still have a means of transportation after.”

“Will said the Ripper was probably working alone, though,” Zeller says.

“I think what Will actually said was that he didn’t have a partner,” Price corrects him, jostling him slightly to get back into the trunk.

“So that’s it. Ripper’s got a friend?” Zeller asks, looking from Price to Beverly.

She shrugs and says, “I don’t know. Did Will say anything about an accomplice this time?”

Zeller and Price exchange a glance. Price frowns, deeply in thought; the answer is no, but they don't say it.

Instead Price asks, "Isn't it equally possible that Ripper knew before he killed the vic that he'd be bringing the body here?"

"So we think Gilbert Parish picked him up somewhere, and then what, Ripper just threw his body in the trunk when he was done with him?"

"But how would he have gotten anywhere without a second car, even if he did leave his own parked here initially? Someone had to have given him a ride at some point."

"We can't really put a BOLO out on a person fitting that description," Price mutters, dusting the windows and the roof of the car for prints. Zeller shoots him a glare that Price doesn't even see and picks something out of the chest cavity.

"That's all a bit over-complicated, isn't it?"

Beverly and Price both look up at Zeller. He bags his bloody sample and returns each of their looks.

"I mean, we're trying to rationalize around the most obvious answer here, aren't we? Ripper had company. Maybe he didn't even drive the victim's car. Maybe he just followed behind in his own car, and then he and his *accomplice* left together." He weighs his hands, brow creasing in concentration. "I'll say it again, Jack ought to cut Will some slack. He's slipping."

"Who's slipping?"

Zeller starts at the sound of Jack's voice. He spins on his heels. Will is right at Jack's shoulder. Zeller shrugs, halfheartedly, hesitant to speak against Will, though he's trying not to be. He says, almost apologetically, "We think this was two people."

Jack turns to look at Will, and Beverly does, too, out of protective instinct. Dr. Lecter is farther off but still in earshot and listening very attentively.

"Explain," Jack commands tonelessly. He's looking at Will, but he says, "Beverly."

She swallows hard on the bubble of sharp fear that bursts in her throat. It shouldn't matter if Will got the details wrong. He couldn't get it right every time. Jack turns his gaze on her, and she steels herself, raises her chin a little, and says, "Somebody definitely gave Ripper a lift."

Jack huffs an impatient sigh, but Beverly continues: "We don't know yet if it happened five miles away from here in town or if that person drove Gilbert Parish's car here and helped display the body."

Will looks pale when Jack turns and walks off silently. He closes his eyes, rubs his forehead with his fingers, and then follows after Jack reluctantly. He stops in his tracks at the look Dr. Lecter gives him and stays where he is, allowing for the other man to approach him and set his hand on the small of his back. They duck their heads together, and Beverly can only guess

at what kind of pep talk the solemn doctor gives. She turns back to the body on the car, deciding not to intrude on their privacy.

Dr. Lecter pulls back, receives a brief touch to the inside of his forearm from Will, and lets Will continue on his path after Jack into the trees where Price's laptop is still set up on Bowman's car. After waiting a moment, Dr. Lecter turns on his heels and makes for the road.

"Anybody else think it's kind of weird?" Zeller asks, voice quiet even though Lecter is way out of range.

"You said it yourself, Will can't make himself see everything a hundred percent of the time. There's bound to be something he misses here and there," Price murmurs, frowning at the spotless car.

"No, I don't mean that," Zeller says, waving one hand in negation. "I mean, Will and Dr. Lecter; kind of weird, right?"

"Well, we always want the forbidden fruit," Beverly says, pulling her gloves off. "They have kind of an interesting history."

"If by interesting you mean, unethical," Price says, pocketing his now ungloved hands.

"People meet in worse ways."

Beverly meets Zeller's eyes, surprised to see him challenging his own argument. He shrugs, at a loss.

"Well, I don't know, okay? They're weird individually; I guess it's sort of nice that they're together."

"So not kind of weird after all?" Price teases, stepping to the side so the coroner can access the body.

The three of them cross underneath the police tape and let the techs swarm the body to cut it down. Beverly watches over her shoulder as the head lolls and then disappears over the roof of the car. She shivers and keeps moving, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Anybody else starving?" Zeller asks, looking from Price to Beverly. He checks his watch. In defense, he says, "What? I flew out of my apartment this morning unshaven and unfed."

Beverly checks her watch, too. It's only about eight o' clock. Jack will want them to head back to Quantico and pore over their findings until at least noon, if not later. Jack re-emerges from the muddy path with Will a few feet behind him. They both wear neutral expressions on their faces, but Beverly can tell Will is rattled and Jack less than pleased.

Loud enough for everyone, including Dr. Lecter on the road and the techs working on moving the body, to hear, Jack announces, "I want everyone back at the crime lab and working on this. Is that understood?"

No one really acknowledges his order, but it's basically accepted and agreed upon that it will be carried out. Jack sounds and looks tired. Most of his fire from earlier has been put out. He doesn't try to stop Will from leaving for Dr. Lecter's car. He just sighs and turns to walk back toward the victim's car.

Fighting her urge to check on Will, Beverly trots after Jack and catches his arm with one hand. He turns with official, biting words prepared on his lips that leave him the second he sees that it's Beverly releasing his arm.

His expression softens, and she realizes he wasn't angry before. Jack is just weary; through to his core, he's weary.

"Are you all right?"

He looks surprised by her inquiry. He asks, "Sympathy? Here I was expecting a reprimand."

"I won't deny that you can be tough on Will because you can be," she starts, walking around him so she's in between him and the victim's car. "But this case isn't just a case for you; it's personal."

Jack shakes his head, patting Beverly's arm so she notices the techs walking with the body bag on a stretcher and steps out of the way. He sighs and crosses his arms, defensive for more reasons than just the obvious breaching of personal matters at a crime scene.

"I'm worried that Will is purposely not seeing the Ripper because he doesn't want to get too close."

Beverly watches him, perplexed, and asks, "We don't *want* him to get too close, Jack."

"No," he says. "Not close the way he got with Hobbs; close the way…" Jack trails off, pursing his lips and turning to watch the door to the coroner's van close. Beverly watches his face, sees the strain in his cheek and jaw.

"The way Lass got close."

He doesn't say anything, but the rigid set of his shoulders relaxes minutely. She watches his eyes flick toward the road where Will is walking back, alone, with his hands stuffed into his jacket pockets. He sees Beverly and starts to walk towards her but stops when Zeller and Price catch his attention, stalling him so she and Jack can finish their conversation.

"This time is different, Jack."

"How?" He turns to look at her, turning slightly so half of Will's body is blocked from view. "If I don't know the exact moment when Will Graham gets too close, the Ripper'll get him, too, just like he got Miriam." He lowers his voice. "He's my responsibility."

"You want to know what's different about this time, Jack? He's got all of us covering him now; not just you. He's got me and Dr. Bloom and Dr. Lecter." She glances at Will over Jack's shoulder. He's smiling at something Price said that put a scowl on Zeller's face. "Hell, he's got Price and Zeller, too."

Jack turns to look, and Will's eyes ping to his face automatically. He looks better than before; less washed out.

"He's got a lot of people looking out for him, Jack. Sometimes I think somebody should be looking out for you, too."

She bumps him with her shoulder, probably too informal given the setting but not receiving a totally negative reaction. Jack huffs a chuckle, shakes his head, and says, "If I can just catch this guy, I won't need anybody looking out for me."

Before Beverly can tell him his obsession with the Ripper is unhealthy, Jack crosses the police tape to speak with a few of the techs who were first on the scene. She watches after him for a moment before walking up to Price's side.

"They ripped him to pieces and ate everything but his heart," Zeller is saying, too casually for Beverly to realize that he's not talking about a case, any case, they worked once. "Zeus used it to bring him back to life."

"Oh, yeah, he put it in his thigh, didn't he?" Price chimes in.

They're talking about Dionysus. Beverly steps around to Will's side, and they make their way back toward the road. Price and Zeller tag along behind them, carrying on their conversation. Zeller apparently can't get his brain off the topic of dismemberment.

"You seem relatively okay," she says, voice soft so Zeller and Price won't hear. Will nods, bunching his shoulders up in a single shrug, and then tracking the cloudy sky with his eyes. Beverly watches the gray masses crawl across the lenses of his glasses. "I guess it helps to have someone."

He looks at her, and something about him seems strangely aloof. His eyes meet hers much more readily than they normally do. The muscles in his face are relaxed, totally not engaged in the present.

Behind them, Price says to Zeller, "They call him twice-born, don't they; since he had to be brought back after they tore him apart?"

Zeller replies, "Yeah, and I think the myth says Zeus dusted them afterward—literally turned them to dust."

"I got that, Zeller."

Will hums thoughtfully and says, "I do have him, don't I?"

"If anyone did, I would hope it was you." She chuckles lightly, scanning his face. He faces the front, a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"Strange to think that would appeal to either of us."

"What's strange about it?" she asks softly, coming to a stop at the front of her car. She looks around. "Do you need a ride back to Quantico?"

Will looks around, remembering. He says, “Yeah, please.”

They get in the car together and buckle up. Will rolls the window down for the first ten minutes or so of the drive until they reach the Beltway. When his window’s closed, Beverly takes her chance to jump in with the question.

“You’re okay, right?” He looks at her. “I mean, Jack can be intense when it comes to the Ripper. It can’t be easy having that amount of focus pointed at you.”

Will shrugs, pressing buttons on the radio. He says, “Jack’s afraid.”

“Do you know of what?”

She glances at him sparingly, keeping her eyes trained primarily on the road. A few drops begin to fall from the sky. Her windshield wipers spring into action, creating a second metronome over the pulsing beat of the music Will’s selected. It’s a Doors song.

“Of the Ripper; of me becoming the Ripper or worse, Miriam Lass.”

“How would you become the Ripper?” she asks, cautious of the territory they’re treading into.

Will sighs, “The way I think…” He shakes his head and rests it against the window. “I could become anyone.”

“That’s pretty scary, Will.”

“Girl, you gotta love your man…”

“I prefer to see it as liberating,” he mumbles, easing his shoulders into the seat and getting comfortable. “In the same way that fear can be liberating.”

“Take him by the hand, make him understand. The world on you depends; our life will never end.”

“Does Dr. Lecter know you feel this way?”

Will relaxes his shoulders. He smiles and says, “He thinks it’s the best part about me.”

“Girl, you gotta love your man.”

“We’d be in trouble if he didn’t, you know. I can’t…switch it off, ever. It’s just who I am.”

“What is?”

“This thing that I do.”

“Riders on the storm.”

“What you can do in the field doesn’t define you as a person, Will. It’s not the entirety of your identity.”

“No,” he concedes. “It’s just the only thing that matters.”

“Into this house we’re born; into this world we’re thrown.”

Taking another risky detour into the realm of personal questions, she asks, “Is that the only thing that matters to Dr. Lecter?”

He pauses and thinks about his answer. His eyes watch the radio as if reading the lyrics rather than listening to them.

“Like a dog without a bone, an actor out on loan; riders on the storm.”

It feels like a long time before Will answers. The sounds of thunder and rain that make up the end of the song fill the car as if the building storm outside has somehow materialized across the dashboard and in the backseat.

Will says, “It’s not the only thing.”

They don’t talk after that. Beverly changes the radio around a few more times and stops on a station playing Nat King Cole when she sees how Will perks up slightly when he hears it. She listens to the words, too, feeling his silence too potently not to focus her attention elsewhere.

“Like a love song that clings to me; how the thought of you does things to me. Never before has someone been more unforgettable in every way, and forever more, that’s how you’ll stay. That’s why, darling, it’s incredible that someone so unforgettable thinks that I am unforgettable, too.”

More music passes between them, and the silence becomes easier to bear. She should have figured Will wouldn’t be one for idle chitchat, especially after just coming off a crime scene.

They get to the crime lab and cross the parking lot together. Will starts slightly at the sound of a car alarm going off down the street and stops walking. His eyebrows furrow together; he looks back the way they came and up at the FBI building looming in front of them. He looks down at himself and scans his hands, blinking a few times. Warily, Beverly approaches him.

“Will?”

He spins around, notices her standing there, and rubs the back of his hand across his forehead. He says, “Oh. Damn it, I…”

“Will, are you okay?”

“Yeah, I just—I’m fine. I’m okay.”

“Really? You look like you just woke up. What’s the last thing you remember?”

Will swallows, looks away, and closes his eyes. She sees them pinging from side to side beneath his lids, searching. He shakes his head and sighs through his nose. He doesn’t want to tell her; he knows he’s lost time.

“Um, talking to Jack about the Ripper.”

She watches his hands settle disconcertedly on his hips and asks, “After you looked at the crime scene the first time?”

He thinks about it, spooling through his memory so tangibly and with so much difficulty she can practically see him going through the footage taped in his brain. He rubs his chin with his fingers, eyes on the ground. Rain droplets begin to fall on them.

“Did I look at it more than once?”

Beverly looks up at the sky. The dark rainclouds are choked and pinched with the rain. She waves her hand for him to follow her inside so they won’t catch the worst of it.

“Will.” She waits for him to bring his eyes back to hers. “Has this happened to you before?”

He swallows and says, “Only one other time; after, um, after the totem pole.” He licks his lips and runs his hands through his hair. “God, what happened? Did something happen?”

She goes to steady him when the door bursts open, and Zeller comes running in flinging water everywhere like a wet dog. He holds the door a moment longer for Price, who shuffles in and scrapes his feet on the rug. They notice Beverly and Will standing further down the hall.

“I thought May was supposed to be the showery one,” Zeller huffs as he breezes passed them into the main atrium of the building. Price follows after him, shaking out his jacket once he’s shrugged out of it.

Will starts to go the same way into the atrium, but Beverly stops him.

“You should tell Dr. Lecter about this, Will. He’d want to know.”

She can see him considering it, a curious expression falling over his face. Slowly, as if working out the minor details in his head, he says, “I should see someone who isn’t personally invested in me. He’s not my doctor anymore.”

Beverly nods, letting him get the door for her. She says, “I think that’d be a good idea.”

He keeps pace with her, though always seeming to be somewhat behind or at an angle from her. It makes starting any kind of conversation awkward, so she resigns herself to a quiet walk on the way to the morgue. Will has some things he needs to think about, and she doesn’t want to interfere with them before he’s figured out what to do. She thinks about what Jack said; about Will not looking at the Ripper on purpose.

Jack’s afraid. Fear can be liberating.

They walk into the pristine room and go straight to the table holding the body of one Gilbert Parish. He looks much paler here in the cold artificial light. Natural sunlight filtered in through the clouds had created the best, even the most flattering, ambient lighting for the Ripper’s display.

The esophagus and larynx sit in bloodied bowls off to the side. Leo, their coroner, waves them in and gestures to the drawer with the safety equipment. Beverly hands Will a pair of goggles and gloves, and then she takes some for herself. They go and stand beside Zeller and Price out of the way in the corner.

Beverly rubs her gloved hands together and checks Will's face for any signs of stress or panic. He tosses back a few aspirin and watches the spectacle before them.

Leo peels a flap of the victim's forehead back over his face, effectively hiding the eyes from view, and peels the other half of the scalp over behind the back of his head.

Zeller says, "Jesus, the saw comes next." He promptly leaves the room and waits in the hallway until the electric whirring and scraping of bone cuts off.

Leo calls out, "Hey, Zeller. It's all clear."

Zeller walks back in with hints of green in his pale cheeks. Price nudges him.

"You want an Alka-Seltzer?"

Leo clips something inside the victim's skull and lifts the brain out in one neat motion. Zeller just nods with his lips pressed tightly together. He's at the sink filling a plastic cup with water when Jack walks into the room and strides right up to see what Leo's working with.

"Is that for me?"

"Well, actually it's for Phyllis." Leo sets the brain on a scale and records its weight. "You know Phyllis, head of forensic pathology," he says, sarcastic as ever. He looks over his shoulder at Zeller. "You all right there, bud?"

"Oh, fine."

"Still not comfortable around the saw, are you?" Jack asks with a hint of teasing.

"It's just not natural," Zeller mutters, rinsing out the cup and filling it with water to drink. He dumps what's left in the cup, trashes it, and struts back into formation with Price at his shoulder.

Beverly always meant to ask how they met and how long they'd known each other, but it just hadn't happened yet.

"I'm telling you, I'm pretty sure the severed femoral artery is what did your guy in. It's not my area, but even if C.O.D. turns out to be head trauma, our killer still thought it necessary to stick him."

"Like if he was going to bleed him?" Jack prompts, peering down into the empty cadaver and then pondering over the contents in the stainless steel bowls.

"Well," Leo hums, brow pinched in contemplation. "Maybe, but he was still alive when his sternum came off; killer sawed right through it while he was still kicking."

Zeller sighs, rubbing the back of his wrist across his forehead.

“Somebody just text me when this is over.”

“We’re almost finished here,” Jack says, nodding at Zeller to go if he wants. Beverly watches him yank off his gloves and shake his head as he retreats into the hallway again, branching to the right instead of to the left. She thinks he might be headed for the break room to get something to eat.

“He’s perfectly fine around things that have already been cut off.” Price shrugs, stepping closer to view the body. It’s sort of ironic since Price works primarily with fingerprints and Zeller more with viscera.

“The last case you worked got to him,” Will mumbles, leaning forward slightly but not moving from his spot.

“What, Braddock?”

Price looks over his shoulder at Will. Will nods but doesn’t look up from the cut-up corpse on the slab.

“It freaked him out.”

When they searched Braddock’s house prior to making the arrest, Zeller discovered the macerated body of a large rat rotting in a blender in the man’s kitchen. Tests showed later that he’d blended it, totally raw, with a full can of Coke. Braddock’s bathroom had traces of blood all over the tub and the floor. He drank and bathed in his victim’s blood, and he ate their organs, too.

Beverly looks at the hollowed out body again. She thinks about the scarecrow made up of Yusuf Vartanian’s corpse and the disappeared body of Miriam Lass. She remembers Will’s words of Garrett Jacob Hobbs when they were still looking for him and when Will had just begun to work with them: *“He’s eating them.”*

“What if Ripper is a cannibal?”

All heads turn and watch Beverly; all heads but Will’s. He ducks his chin slightly and rubs at the base of his neck with his hand. His back is to her, but she can see his eyes close in profile.

“Harvesting the organs and eating them,” Price says, eyes gravitating back toward the opened chest cavity.

Jack adds, looking at Will, “And possibly doing so with an accomplice.”

Will sighs, removes his gloves, and paces slowly out of the room, pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger.

Price says as Will steps into the hallway, “He probably just needs some fresh—”

He stops at the solid thump that comes from the other side of the door just before it swings all the way shut.

Beverly calls his name and gets no reply. Jack beats her to the door, but she's right behind him. They find Will curled up on his side, not seizing but quite unconscious.

"Did he faint?" Leo asks from his perch in the doorway.

Jack tests Will's forehead with the back of his hand. To Beverly, he says, "He's got a fever."

She hears him mutter under his breath, "Damn it, Will."

"Should I call Dr. Lecter?"

"I want him in the sick room until his fever breaks. If it doesn't, then we can call Dr. Lecter. There's no use in bringing him down here for something if it fixes itself."

It is a pretty long way out to Quantico from Baltimore. Still, Beverly would want to know if Saul was sick at work, sooner rather than later. Add the fever and the fainting spell to Will's loss of time earlier, and she's already made up her mind, orders be damned. She says, "Someone should tell him this happened, Jack."

He sighs and resigns himself to agreeing with her since, after all, he can't really stop her from making a phone call. He hands her Dr. Lecter's business card from his wallet and then crouches back down to Will's level. He and Price hoist Will up between their shoulders and walk him down the hall toward the building's infirmary.

Beverly walks back into the morgue where it's quietest and dials the number on her cell phone. Leo works quickly and efficiently with the examined corpse to set the flaps of skin back where he is finished working with it.

He rolls the victim's skin back over his forehead, and the eyes present themselves once more. Dr. Lecter answers then, on the fourth ring.

"Hello, Dr. Lecter, this is Beverly Katz."

"How are you, agent?" His tone of voice is polite thought curt. "Is everything all right?"

"I'm actually calling about Will. He's got a fever."

"Has something happened to him?"

"He fainted," she says carefully. "He lost some time earlier; forgot what happened at the crime scene and the whole drive here from Towson."

There's a brief silence and a shuffling noise on Dr. Lecter's side.

Leo folds the left ribcage carefully back into place and mimics the action with the other side, stitching the mangled flesh back together as he goes. The centermost cuts were delivered

when the victim was still alive. Those further down the torso and across the chest are Leo's handiwork.

"Then I suppose we can put it off no longer."

"You were already going to make an appointment?"

"I have made several. As soon as Will decided, I planned to take him."

"Maybe it shouldn't have been his call," Beverly says, aware of how careful she must be to challenge a doctor in his element.

"It isn't anymore."

"Dr. Lecter," she begins, not knowing quite what to say but feeling a harsh word on the tip of her tongue. "Do you remember what you said to me in Williamsport?"

He waits a beat and then answers, "I told you I would take care of him."

She takes a breath and says, "Your relationship with Will isn't any of my business, but I take people at their word, doctor, and whether you're living up to yours or not is my business."

A beat of silence flutters between them.

"When we were in Williamsport, I also told you how much I appreciated your honesty. It is as refreshing now as it was then, as is the amount of concern you have for Will. He is lucky to have you for a friend."

Beverly takes her hand off her hip and expels a quiet sigh. She rubs her palm across her forehead soothingly.

Calmly, Dr. Lecter asks, "Do I need to come and collect him?"

"No, Jack wants to try and break his fever here first. If he's okay, I'll just take him home after. I'll keep you posted on how he's doing."

"Please do."

They exchange brief farewells and Beverly slips her phone back into her pocket. She feels like she's just run a difficult, grueling race. She steps out of the room and finds Jack conferring with Bowman outside the infirmary. She walks passed them to peek inside and sees Will lying flat on one of the beds by the wall with his shirt opened down the middle and a washcloth draped across his forehead. The nurse dabs clinically at a few places on his chest and slides the thermometer into his ear.

Beverly ducks out of the room and gently closes the door behind her. Bowman greets her with a nod. She nods back and walks through the lounge and into the break room to find Zeller with a bowl of soup and Price gnawing on some crackers.

"Soup for breakfast?"

“It’s best on rainy days,” he says, shrugging.

Price nods and finishes off the salty crackers Zeller probably gave him. He picks out a strawberry Danish from the cabinet and takes a bite. Beverly eyes the coffee cake and grabs a slice, feeling peckish.

“Is Will okay?” Price asks in between bites. Zeller looks up, too, curious.

“They’re just waiting on his fever to break. It doesn’t look like it’s anything serious.”

“So his doctor boyfriend won’t be coming for him then?”

Price gives Zeller a blank look. Zeller shrugs, spoon halfway to his mouth.

“What? It’s a legitimate question.”

“I called him and told him he didn’t have to,” Beverly says, separating part of the soft pastry with a plastic fork and letting it melt on her tongue to savor the sweet coffee taste.

“So was it all the fever that made him drop, or did you hit a development in the case that shocked him into unconsciousness?”

“Bev suggested Ripper might be eating his victims’ organs.”

“Lovely,” Zeller drawls, though the deep frown on his face indicates he thinks otherwise.

Beverly says, “I think he’s been having headaches on and off all day.”

“Even with the aspirin?”

Price swallows a bite of the strawberry Danish. He says, “Yeah, he did look pretty stressed out at the crime scene today.”

Zeller retorts, “You mean, more than usual.”

“What is it with you picking on him all the time?” Price fires back, mouth full but coherent enough to understand.

“I’m not *picking* on him, damn. Will’s fine. I mean, you know, obviously he’s not fine right now.”

“You’re a middle child, right?” Price asks, serving only to confuse Zeller. “So you know you’re acting like a mean but loving older brother.”

“Excuse you, I am not mean.”

Beverly says, “Sounds like an admission of guilt to my ears.”

Zeller glares at both Price and Beverly. He sets his emptied soup bowl in the sink and stalks dramatically out of the break room.

“What a diva.” Price laughs and tosses the clear plastic wrapper in the trash. He goes the same way Zeller went, and Beverly quietly finishes off her coffee cake.

The silence provides her with a serene backdrop off which to bounce her thoughts. She thinks of Will getting into the car with her, not entirely in control of himself or of what he was saying. She remembers his words, unfair as it may be to conjure them again now that she knows Will couldn’t have meant to say any of it to her.

“I could become anyone.”

“He thinks it’s the best part about me.”

“We’d be in trouble if he didn’t.”

“I can’t switch it off, ever.”

She remembers his disorientation and the subtle but present resignation to it. She remembers the fear that hit him next.

“God, what happened? Did something happen?”

He thought he’d done something, but he couldn’t have done anything. Will is with them; he’s one of the good guys.

So why does he think he isn’t?

Beverly throws her paper plate and fork in the trash and walks back out through the lounge into the hallway. Jack is still perched at the infirmary door. He tells her Will is still out and that the nurse will get them when he comes around.

She has to coax him back down the hallway to the conference room where Zeller, Price, and several techs are shuffling around the room pinning pictures to tack boards and piling the victim’s personal files on Jack’s desk.

A handful of agents leave the room when Jack walks in, clearing the space. Zeller, Price, Bowman, and Beverly stay, as well as a few other agents.

Jack rounds his desk and sits. Beverly takes one of the chairs across from him, Price takes the one next to her, and Zeller analyzes the tack board with Bowman at his shoulder. Jack leans his elbows on the desk, steeples his fingers, and looks down at the opened file before him for about twenty seconds before sighing and slamming it shut.

“These aren’t going to tell us anything.”

He pushes it away disdainfully with two fingers.

“Tell me more about the second-man theory,” he says, leaning back in his chair. Tired; Jack looks so tired.

“There’s nothing conclusive from the autopsy about whether it was a one- or two-man job,” Zeller says without looking away from the tack board. “One guy could’ve committed the murder, even moved the body, on his own, but he needed another set of wheels to get out of the woods.”

“He could have walked several miles to get picked up in town, and the person giving him a lift wouldn’t know what he’d just been doing.”

Jack says, “We found no equipment at the scene.”

Beverly cuts in, “He could have driven his car to the site, left it there, and then driven it home.”

“Or,” Jack sighs, kneading at his worried brow. “Or someone else drove Gilbert Parish’s car to the woods with his body in the trunk, helped the Ripper set it up, and then rode back into town in the Ripper’s car.”

“We thought about that,” Zeller mumbles, coming to stand behind Price and leaning onto the back of the chair with his hands. “The thing is, we can’t prove, definitively, what happened either way. All we can say is someone else was without a doubt in the car with the Ripper before or after he killed Gilbert Parish.”

Price says, “It’s more than nothing, Jack.”

“It’s a whole lot more than nothing,” Bowman says, taking a step closer to the tack board.

“Talk to me, Lloyd.” Jack is on his feet immediately. He rounds his desk and approaches the tack board. Zeller, Price, and Beverly all turn to look.

“The Baltimore Beltway connects Parish’s home address to the location where his body was found. Ripper knew last time exactly when Vartanian got off work and what route he took home. He killed him on the street where he lived.”

Zeller walks back up to the board. He ponders Bowman’s theory as he says, “You think we could find the actual crime scene if we retrace the steps he would have taken to get home from the Beltway.”

Bowman looks from Zeller to Jack. He says, “Could be a lead.”

Beverly took the Beltway to get into and out of Towson. It definitely could be a lead.

Jack shrugs on his coat and then changes his mind. He sets it on the back of his chair again and taps it with his hands, unsure.

Quietly, Beverly says, “I can stay, Jack.” He looks at her. “Anyway, I promised I’d keep Dr. Lecter updated.”

Jack takes Price, Bowman, and Zeller, and Beverly walks back into the infirmary. Will is still out, but more in a sleeplike state now. Beverly takes out her phone, reading the chart for his temperature. She calls Dr. Lecter and lets him know the fever broke. He sounds relieved but

also something else that she can't place or name. She tells him she'll take Will back home when he wakes up, and Dr. Lecter thanks her. He sounds only relieved this time around.

Beverly puts her phone back in her pocket and waits patiently for Will to wake up; she admires the tranquility sleep affords him too much to disturb him. The nurse gives her a book to read, and Beverly is actually a little grateful to not be outside in the rain.

She would rather be the one to speak to Will when he wakes up. She wants to be assured, when he does wake, that he's fully present and not hiding from her somewhere in the shadowy recesses of his brain.

Beverly flips through the pages of O'Neill's *Lazarus Laughed* and finds the line, "Tragic is the plight of the tragedian whose only audience is himself! Life is for each man a solitary cell whose walls are mirrors."

She shuts the book and leaves it closed on her lap. It only makes her think of the Ripper and the likelihood that he corrupted someone or found someone as corrupt as he is to carry out his work with him. She doesn't want to think about it or what it means for the bodies they'll find later if Bowman's theory comes up dry.

Instead of thinking more about it, Beverly counts the distant booms of thunder muffled through layers of bricks and concrete. She counts them against Will's steady inhales and exhales.

She counts and squeezes the corners of the tiny paperback play transcribed into a book. She counts and waits for Will to wake up. She's heftily surprised to find that patience is not something she has to force. It comes with keeping her word to Dr. Lecter, and so it comes easily.

Will wrinkles his nose in his sleep. His glasses are crooked on his face. Beverly leaves him just the way he is. She doesn't want to mar his unblemished peace.

More thunder sounds outside. She can almost hear the rain pouring down.

Chapter End Notes

Katz is with a bro named Saul in *Red Dragon*.

Braddock is based on Richard Trenton Chase, AKA "The Vampire of Sacramento."

Riders on the Storm by The Doors, Unforgettable by Nat King Cole, Blue in Green by Miles Davis.

Take It As It Comes

Chapter Summary

Will and Hannibal think about the future.

Chapter Notes

"Have you ever been in love? Horrible, isn't it? It makes you so vulnerable. It opens your chest and it opens up your heart and it means that someone can get inside you and mess you up."
—Neil Gaiman, The Sandman, Vol. 9: The Kindly Ones

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Time to walk/Time to run/Time to aim your arrows/At the sun/Take it easy, baby/Take it as it comes

"Tell me again what Jack Crawford said to you."

Will groans and turns his face into the sheet. He holds on tighter to the top edge of the bed and circles his hips, valiantly attempting to distract Hannibal from the topic at hand. His legs tighten around Hannibal's waist, and Hannibal allows him a few more seconds of this before repeating himself.

"Tell me what he said to you, Will."

The man flops back onto the bed and glares up at Hannibal from beneath the curled strands of wet hair splayed across his forehead and fallen into his eyes. Hannibal moves them back with his fingers and kisses Will's temple, noting the way his body relaxes at the gesture. He still heaves a frustrated sigh and drops his arms from Hannibal's shoulders. His legs stay where they are wrapped around Hannibal's body.

"Do we really have to do this now? I told you already."

"I would like to hear it again."

Will yanks the pillow out from beneath his lower back and shoves it underneath his head. He looks up at Hannibal, visibly irritated but still very much enthralled by the demands of his

physical body. He traces the radial and median veins in Hannibal's arm with the backs of his knuckles. With his other hand he touches Hannibal's face.

"He said I was withholding information." Will rolls his hips slightly, bumping his chest against Hannibal's. They both gasp at the sensation. Will's eyes fall closed. Will continues through gritted teeth, "That I was purposely not seeing the Ripper *because*—Ow, shit."

"Apologies," Hannibal mumbles when he releases Will's skin from between his teeth. He watches the white ring of teeth marks burn pink and then scarlet over Will's collar bone. He kisses that burning rose, softly. "Please continue."

"Um, he…" Will winds one of his arms around Hannibal's neck and pulls slightly on Hannibal's hair with his free hand. Will kisses him once then bites his lip. "He thinks I'm afraid of getting too close and ending up like Lass."

"You're closer than she ever was, Will."

"I know. I know I am," Will groans, arching his back and digging his head back into the pillow.

"I never wanted to take her to bed." Hannibal shifts his hips and spurns their bodies back into motion. Will moans, a high sound like an animal might make. "What did you say to him?"

"I let him think that he…Oh, my—*Ah,* I let him think he was *right*."

Hannibal inhales the sweltering heat trapped in Will's blood, hissing and burbling just beneath his skin. He presses a more controlled kiss to the curve of his neck and moves to his ear after tasting the sweat beaded there.

"But what did you say, Will?"

"I said the Ripper wouldn't wait for me to get that close," Will says in one frantic breath. "He could kill me if h-he made up his mind to, and he's probably al-already *done* that." Will throws his head back again and holds both Hannibal's biceps in his hands. "Hannibal, fuck. Do it, fuck me, oh, my God."

Hannibal grabs hold of Will's hip and does as he's told. He drags the pillow out from beneath Will's head and resituates it beneath his back. Will's limbs constrict about him like four snakes crushing their bodies together into one solid mass of being. Hannibal uses his limbs in very much the same way; his own thighs shoving against Will's to hold his legs apart and bring their bodies closer together. His hands clutch at Will's ribs, shoulders, and hips.

The sheet bunches up in Will's fingers and comes off its corner of the mattress when Hannibal tilts his hips at the exact angle he taught Will to employ easily and masterfully not too long ago. Will mumbles something under his breath, a supplication Hannibal can't quite hear.

"Are you so certain my mind is made up, Will?" Hannibal pants into Will's neck, biting and sucking the abused skin there. Will's answering hum tingles against his lips. "What have I

decided?"

"You want to keep me," Will sighs. He lets Hannibal take over their movements and lays back, licking his lips and closing his eyes. His fingers twist in Hannibal's hair. "You can't let me go. I'm part of you now."

"Are you, Will?"

He rams into the backs of Will's thighs, reveling in the full body shudder as Will reaches the point of unraveling completely.

Barely able to catch his breath, Will says, "Yes, Hannibal."

Hannibal's breath hitches; he likes the way Will sounds gasping his name like that. Will knows he likes it. It's no coincidence that he does it again and again, the name tripping off his tongue taking on a sharper edge the closer he comes to orgasm. His nails bite into Hannibal's shoulder blades, and he cries out, biting savagely into Hannibal's chest.

"Will," he hisses.

He shivers and flattens his torso against Will's chest. Very distinctly, he feels a small piece of his flesh break off beneath Will's gnashing teeth. Will laps his tongue at the blood trickling out of the wound. His throat bobs once, mouth hovering over the ravaged flesh and panting hot breath into Hannibal's blood and body.

"I thought about how I'd taken communion from you."

Hannibal moans and fists Will's cock, pulling roughly on it as he forces his hips to continue juddering against Will. He leans down and kisses Will's opened, swollen lips. He tastes his blood on Will's tongue, on his chin, gathered in the hollow of his suprasternal notch. He swirls his tongue twice in the curve of the hyoid bone and Will's body spasms and closes around him, lit through with the lurid chemicals oxytocin and vasopressin. Hannibal breathes in the volatile, intoxicating proof of Will's passion and devotion and trembles through the satisfying jolts of his own orgasm.

Their nose brush and their lips graze. Will's neck is arched back and his eyes are closed.

They suck air into their lungs and slowly descend back down the rungs of the sex cycle; leveling off into a plateau, lingering a while on tamped excitement, and fading back into the calming resolution.

Will mumbles into Hannibal's throat, worn out and yet unrecovered, "You'd never find anyone like me."

"I wouldn't, would I?" Hannibal sighs. He leans over Will's side and lies beside him on the bed.

With a grunt, Will reaches for the small container of wet wipes he set on the side table and tiredly cleans his navel. Hannibal follows his lead and unrolls the condom he wore to protect

himself from possible dog hair on Will's sheets, ties it, and tosses it into the small trash bin next to the wall. Will watches the arc it makes on its passage through the air.

"Ten points," he says, weakly throwing the dirtied wet wipe the same way and missing by about a foot. He swears and drops his head back, all his energy sapped from the effort of reaching for the container in the first place.

He reaches again for the box of Kleenex and turns on his side to dab at the, admittedly minor, wound on Hannibal's chest with a tissue. It's nowhere near as provocative or noticeable as the bite he received in Williamsport. He wonders how keen Will would be on opening the wound again and again until the marks scarred indelibly on Hannibal's skin.

After a moment of deliberating as to how the bite should be handled, Hannibal climbs out of bed and saunters into the bathroom in the hall. He disinfects the area and tapes a gauze pad over the most prominent gashes. If he discovers Will has no desire to trade oaths more permanent than paper, it will not serve him to neglect the damage that's been wrought on his body. Hannibal crosses back into Will's room and closes the door behind him after shooing one of the smaller dogs out. Will is exactly where he left him with his hair in his eyes and with his naked limbs splayed carelessly.

He looks to the right when Hannibal crawls back into bed beside him, confused at the loss of his pillow. He remembers what he did with it right as Hannibal presses his hand to Will's hip for him to turn. He pivots his hip just enough for Hannibal to pull the pillow free from beneath his body, sits up once it's been dislodged, and lets Hannibal place it beneath his head. He lays back down and huffs silently, eyes closed.

"You do have a plan, don't you?"

"For what, Will?"

"When I was supposed to be out with fever, I heard Jack saying something in the hall to one of the guys; Bowman, I think. They're going to use the Beltway to try to find where we killed Parish."

Where we killed Parish.

Hannibal smiles and presses his fingers to Will's scalp, threading them between his dark, sweat-soaked locks. Will leans into the touch and turns his face toward Hannibal's. His eyes open, perfectly lucid and bright with understanding and chagrin.

"Um, where you killed…I meant—"

Hannibal halts Will's explanation with a kiss. Their tongues tangle momentarily. Hannibal pulls back only when Will's body relaxes again and laughs softly at Will's reluctance to separate.

"You worry they'll find evidence linking us to his murder."

“Don’t you?” Will opens his eyes and looks at Hannibal; no glasses, no obstructions coming between them to keep Hannibal out. They never worked to keep him safe anyway, not from Hannibal. “We were covered in his blood screwing in the dirt two feet away from where he bled out. You didn’t even use a condom.”

“Do you know how much rain Baltimore has received in the past two days, Will?” He waits a beat for Will to ponder the perpetual autumnal storm inhabiting Maryland. “Nearly an inch since I first showed him to you, Will. Failing that, I took other precautions while you were getting dressed to erase any indication of our presence there. If they should find where he was killed, there will be no trace of us anywhere in those woods.”

“What other precautions?”

“Hydrogen peroxide,” Hannibal says, nosing at Will’s shoulder. “Do you really think me so careless, Will?”

“I think you’re brazen.” Will sits up on his elbows with some effort. “I think you’re waving this in Jack’s face like a red flag in a bullfight.”

“Bulls die in bullfights.”

“So do matadors,” Will says quietly. He watches Hannibal for a moment, swallows hard, and looks away. He touches Hannibal’s fingers with two of his. “Even the best ones can.”

Will tugs Hannibal’s fingers against his palm and holds them there. His breathing changes slightly, catches, and stutters in his throat. Hannibal tracks the movement in his chest where it heaves almost imperceptibly. Will sighs and lays back down, turned on his side. Hannibal’s arm, guided by Will’s hand, drapes around his waist.

“If Jack is the bull, and you’re the matador…Does that make me the flag?”

“The distraction, you mean?”

Hannibal waits, but Will doesn’t respond. He releases Hannibal’s hand and instead clings to the edge of his pillow. The sight is displeasing to Hannibal, but he allows it to slide.

“Do you think I’ve been using you to distract Jack Crawford, Will?”

Will takes a deep breath and says, “The bull doesn’t attack the flag because it’s distracting. It attacks the flag because the flag appears to be the thing antagonizing it, like before when you were trying to turn *me* against Jack in your office. You were the matador again, and that time you made him the flag.” He turns to look over his shoulder at Hannibal.

“I’m asking if you’re trying to make him see me as the antagonist this time so he won’t see you instead.”

They stare at each other for a long time, and a realization slowly begins to dawn on Will. Hannibal follows its progression in his mind on his face; how his eyes widen, how his mouth falls open, how his brows knit together.

“Is that your angle?”

“Actually, it’s yours.”

Will scoots back so he can sit up and asks, “What the hell are you talking about?”

“To exonerate you, Will, we must first condemn you.”

Will blinks; Hannibal can feel the change in his heartbeat. He can scent the quickening of his blood, a rushed, heady current just beneath Will’s skin and just beneath the ever-present aroma of his encephalitis.

He says, “Hannibal, you’re scaring me.”

“Hold onto that,” Hannibal murmurs, sitting up beside Will and searching his eyes. “When they see how genuine your fear is, they will believe you couldn’t have known what I was doing, that you couldn’t let yourself know; that is, after all, what happened.”

He tries to smile, but this is not the way he wanted to tell Will what their endgame would be, what their only endgame could be as they neared the end of this perfect window they found together. He sees Will struggle to understand where Hannibal is going with this turn in their conversation. Hannibal brushes his thumb across some of the blood drying on his chest where Will bit him, smearing the red. It draws Will’s attention completely, the way a red flag draws a bull. He only looks more terrified for his understanding.

His eyes slip closed. He brings his knees to his chest and rests his elbows on them while his hands rifle through his hair.

“I’m the flag,” Will breathes, shaking his head. “I’m the flag, but I’m the matador, too.”

“We both are, Will.”

“How does that work?” He turns on Hannibal. His eyes are brimmed with raw red; sensitive skin worried with saline tears so far left unshed. “I go down for Parish; I go down for Lass? Jack won’t believe I killed her.”

“Not for Parish, Will; not for Lass either.”

“Cassie Boyle and Marissa Schurr?” His nostrils flare. “What for?”

“Why do you think I killed them, Will?”

“For the same reason you got Fontaine Preston to kill Casson; they were gifts.”

Slowly, Hannibal asks, “But why assemble an entirely separate identity to do it?”

“Because you—you don’t like others taking credit for your work.” Will shakes his head, fighting what he knows to be the truth. Hannibal can see it forming on the edges of his eyes, the way they harden and glint in the low light of the late afternoon sun. He doesn’t have to ask, but he does, of course. “Why?”

The single word is an accusation and a request simultaneously. Will makes no attempt to ignore this hurdle he has found himself faced with. Hannibal wants to kiss him for that alone, but he can't until he answers the question.

"Will," Hannibal murmurs his name, touching his arm to soothe the panic spiking his already high temperature and teasing his pulse. "If Jack Crawford were to catch me now, he would think you were complicit in the most recent murders; you were, in fact."

"You want him to think I was a murderer before I met you. *Why?*"

"Because you weren't, Will."

Will looks at him, incredulous. He squints his eyes.

Hollowly, on the verge of sounding robotic, Will says, "I'm going to make you some coffee."

Hannibal sighs and allows Will to pull on his pants and leave the room before following after in just his shorts. He finds Will in the kitchen, as he said, making a pot of coffee. It's about five in the afternoon, not terribly late for a cup, though Hannibal would prefer wine or tea.

"Imagine if Jack put you in chains only to find that you were innocent."

"But I'm *not*. You said so yourself." Will shakes his head, a silent plea for Hannibal to discontinue this line of thought. He pours a few cups of water into the coffee maker, closes the lid, and presses the button for the machine to whir into action. It's an old appliance, at least a few years, but commendably maintained. Quietly, Will says, "You can't know that they'd ever let me out."

That, all along, had been one of Will's greatest fears. In a life like his that was governed by them, the singular threat of imprisonment had been the one, ironically, to enslave and domesticate his mind; the one to collar his acuity and staunch his true natural urges.

"Who am I, Will?" Hannibal asks in an equally soft voice.

Will looks at him as if he has just spoken in another language. He raises an eyebrow and nods his head once.

"You're…"

"Who *am* I, Will?"

His lips press together in a hard line. Without looking away, he says, "The Ripper."

"And what else?"

Will swallows. Recognition flickers across his face, followed quickly by denial.

"You're the copycat, but—" Will stops himself from finishing his sentence. Something in his eyes changes; he shakes his head. "No."

Hannibal warms to think that the idea is offensive to Will. He beams with masked pride that, with the crossroads in his sights at last, Will really does mean to stay; that he wants Hannibal to stay, too.

“They would learn in time that you were framed by the true Chesapeake Ripper; that they are the same man; that he had finally made up his mind, as you say I have.”

“But you would—They would just throw you in the cell next to mine. Neither of us goes free in that scenario,” Will snaps indignantly. “What’s the point of throwing me under the bus if you’re just going to follow after?”

“In this scenario, Will, you go free,” Hannibal says, taking the mugs out of Will’s hands.

I only want you to be free, Will.

He pours them each a cup and adds two sugars to Will’s. To his he adds one cream and one sugar. He takes the coffee when Hannibal presses it into his hands. They tremble noticeably against Hannibal’s fingers. The black liquid sloshes around in the mug but doesn’t spill over. His jaw is clenched.

“*Free,* Hannibal? Or on a longer leash?”

Hannibal smiles, the picture of congeniality though unpleasant disarray tosses within him just beneath the surface. Will sees through the façade. Of course he does. Hannibal doesn’t know if he meant for Will to feel it or not. He doesn’t know if the frightened sense of uncertainty and doubt stirring deeply inside of him is for his fate or for Will’s should his plan not work. It must work, though. There is no alternative.

“On the right side of the bars, Will.”

“You mean the wrong side,” Will mumbles. He takes an unsteady drink of his coffee and shakes his head, breathing unevenly. His voice shakes when he asks, “Why can’t we just run then if it’s inevitable that they’ll catch us?”

Hannibal guides Will into a seat at the table and sits beside him. He drinks his coffee and waves the dog sniffing at the back of Will’s chair away. It scampers off without further incident. They all stay out of the kitchen after that. Will’s head is in his hands, and he misses the entire exchange.

“You have to be the one to catch me, Will.”

Will thinks about it and voices the progression of his thoughts: “To prove to them that I’m not in on it with you.” He sits up straighter and rubs his hand across his mouth. “Jack wants to find you more than anything else in the world.”

“And if you were the only key, he would have no choice.”

“He would need me to get to you, and if he—if he thought I was innocent and that you framed me, he would think that this has all been an elaborate manipulation to get me off your trail.”

Hannibal takes another drink of his coffee. Will doesn't ask if it was or wasn't all an elaborate manipulation. He knows the answer Hannibal would give him; he knows already he would believe it, wholeheartedly, even if he didn't want to.

"And after, when Jack sends me after you, what then? I do his dirty work, and you're chumming up with Chilton in—oh, God, *Chilton*." Will rubs fiercely at his forehead. "He's going to eat this up; two for the price of one."

Hannibal stands to retrieve an aspirin for the migraine sweeping over Will. He hears him muttering under his breath. When he returns to Will's side with a pill and a glass of water, he hears his words: "…overwhelmed with love, as when your eyes close upon the gift of life that without cease I give you."

He presses the aspirin into Will's palm and sets the glass down in front of him. He places one hand on the back of Will's seat. Will tosses it back and drinks the water.

"My love," Hannibal says, treasuring Will's expression. "We have found each other thirsty and we have drunk up all the water and the blood." He nips at Will's bare shoulder, calmly memorizing the shiver it earns him.

"We found each other hungry and we bit each other as fire bites, leaving wounds in us." Hannibal hears the smile in Will's voice around the line about the fire. It will remain an image between and through and within them; the image of two fires that began as isolated events but began to truly thrive and wreak destruction when brought into union with the only other force in existence that could hope to match it.

"But wait for me," Hannibal whispers. Will bites his lip when Hannibal looks up at him. He accepts Hannibal's kiss now, now that he understands. "Keep for me your sweetness. I will give you, too, a rose."

Will bumps his forehead against Hannibal's. He sighs, and the sound of it threatens tear shed, though his eyes shine with something other than sadness when he returns Hannibal's stare. He chuckles finally and says, "I always thought I'd quote that to a girl."

"Did you?" Hannibal asks, brushing the hair at the nape of Will's neck with his fingers.

"There was one girl I wanted to, but I kept messing it up. I guess it didn't feel right."

"A weak flame, perhaps?"

Will smiles weakly, finding Hannibal's knee with his hand and squeezing. He shakes his head, an indirect answer to an indirect question. He continues to shake his head until Hannibal brings him in for an embrace.

"Couldn't we just keep doing what we've been doing? You've been doing it for years."

"Always alone, Will. Jack would begin to suspect you."

"He suspects me now," Will sighs, tipping his head and burying his face in Hannibal's neck. "Freddie Lounds and the entirety of her *following* suspect me."

“I suspect Miss Lounds will be dealt with in due time.”

“Are we going to kill her?” Will asks, sounding almost hopeful.

“No, Will.” Hannibal runs his hand down the back of Will’s head. He kisses Will’s temple, one of his favorite places on Will above the shoulders. “There will be a time for that later. We won’t dirty our hands with it now.”

“I don’t see how it matters. If I’m going to jail, I might as well…”

“You are going as an innocent man, Will. You will walk out of there a free man.”

His words weigh heavy with a promise that he knows in his bones he must keep or die. Will would not let him break it and live to tell about it. Will says none of that, but Hannibal knows.

“How do you know I wouldn’t kill you?” Will leans back and watches Hannibal, genuinely curious. He asks, “How do you know that if you did that to me I wouldn’t come out and just use my freedom to kill you?”

“What would it prove, Will? That we worked together, perhaps, and you were angry I got away scot-free without making an effort to free you? Your name would never be cleared.”

“Well,” Will begins, hesitant to broach the topic on his mind. “How do I know you wouldn’t kill me?”

“How could I, Will, when I’ve decided to keep you.”

“That’s not what I said. I said you *want* to keep me. I said you can’t let me go; that doesn’t mean you won’t do it to save yourself.”

“I could say the same to you.”

“This is *your* harebrained *idea*,” Will says, voice creeping up just so in volume. “It’s a good plan, I’ll give you that, but I don’t know if…I don’t *know* if we’re capable of that; of *doing* that.”

“Trusting each other, Will?”

“Tell me something, tell me anything, Hannibal.”

Hannibal feels his mouth curve with a frown. He asks, “For what purpose?”

“I want you to tell me a truth and a lie.”

“For what *purpose*, Will?”

Will’s jaw clenches and he stands to his feet, the chair legs scraping with his sudden movements. Actually yelling now, he says, “You want me to go to *jail* for you and just have faith that you won’t leave me there to rot so you can go off and live your life! Maybe all of

this *was* just an elaborate manipulation so you could make Jack doubt my insights into the case."

Hannibal stands, calm and collected, as Will scrubs his coffee mug clean. The picture is reminiscent of an earlier point in their relationship when Hannibal had been the one furiously washing dishes to avoid lunging at Will and ripping a chunk out of his neck for his sporadic bouts of childish frailty.

With the tables turned now, Hannibal wonders if Will didn't pick up this tendency from him. He scorns the thought.

Hannibal waits until the faucet switches off, and after almost thirty seconds of uninterrupted silence, Hannibal relents. Sighing silently, he says, "You have encephalitis, Will."

Will's shoulders stiffen beneath his shirt. He doesn't turn to face Hannibal; he doesn't look away from the sink either.

"What, now?"

"It is an inflammation of the brain and spinal cord. I said earlier that you were dissociating from reality; that was a lie."

Will turns to look at him. Hannibal expects rage, but Will is smiling deprecatingly. He says, "Nice try."

Hannibal waits. Will's smile falters.

"We haven't been to see a doctor yet. There's no way you could know that." Will watches Hannibal's face for signs of a tell anywhere. There are none. There wouldn't be. Will should know by now; it's something of a pity that he doesn't.

"I can smell it on you, Will."

Will laughs outright at that. Still on the disbelieving end of the spectrum, Will says, "Oh, well, that explains why you haven't told me about how my brain is actually on fire. Can you smell cancer, too?"

He wrinkles his nose contemptuously at the thought of rotting, distended tumors spoiling the meat of the host's body.

"Yes, and it is nowhere near as pleasant."

Will thinks about their exchange of words. He says, "Wait. Jack's wife?"

"I knew she was dying, before she told me and before she discussed it with Jack."

Belatedly, he realizes Will inadvertently accused him of withholding his diagnosis from him because he enjoyed the smell too much. He resents the shallow implication, as much as the unmistakable fragrance truly does appeal to him.

“I don’t believe you,” Will mutters. The house is incredibly quiet in the absence of his shouting. One of the dogs scratches on the hardwood floor in the other room, pacing and probably waiting for Will to give the signal to attack Hannibal. “You *knew* what this was doing to me, and you *let* it happen.”

As collected as he can force himself to be, Hannibal says, “It is a part of the plan, Will.”

“I’m sure.” Will nods, taking angry, ragged breaths. “It’s not enough that my judgment is questionable at best; you want my sanity on the line, too. I let you get away with Vartanian, and I *helped* you with Parish. We’re *doing* this, aren’t we? When is it going to be enough for you?”

“This is enough, Will.”

The glass mug shatters against the wall when Will flings it from its place beside him on the counter.

“Stop lying to me!”

The dogs are barking in the other room. Will tuts at the two that rush into the kitchen, and they halt at the line dividing the room they’re standing in from the den. The other dogs come, too, curious and riled up. Will silences them all as easily as if he were a conductor waving a baton over the winds to guide them into a rest. Hannibal is mildly impressed; he has always admired Will’s authority over the pack of hounds he’s accumulated. There is no time now to appreciate it, unfortunately.

Hannibal observes Will putting his face in his hands and leaning back against the counter, weary and devastated and very much in denial about the latter. He takes a few deep breaths that begin to come more quickly and drag more on his lungs.

“Will.”

“No, you get a—get—” Will gasps and clutches blindly at the counter behind him. He turns his back to Hannibal; his shoulders heave and his head tilts back.

“Will.”

“Hann—no, I’m…”

He swats at Hannibal’s hand on his arm and elbows him hard in the ribs when he moves in closer. It’s actually a well-aimed shot. Hannibal doesn’t show that he’s affected and wrestles Will’s arms out to his sides and turns him around so his back is against the edge of the counter.

“You’re hyperventilating, Will.”

Will’s eyes are panicked, carrying every semblance that they did in Hannibal’s drawings of him as Wound Man approaching the shredder; the same look he obliterated by the dozens.

“Let me help you.”

Hannibal suspects Will would be glaring at him if he could focus on anything other than the labored inhales and exhales scraping through his esophagus. Hannibal takes his arms in his hands and pulls him to sit. Ideally he would lie Will flat on his back, but Will might not be comforted by such a pronounced position of weakness given the circumstances. Instead Hannibal hoists him in between his legs with his back pulled flat against his chest. He places a hand over Will's sternum, over the flickering horse trot of his heartbeat and the other just below his ribs.

He says, "Breathe through your belly, Will. Focus on my hand."

Hannibal squeezes his fingers against the lowest ridge of the sixth rib. Will looks down at Hannibal's hand splayed across his bare abdomen and pinches his eyes shut in concentration.

Gently, Hannibal adds, "Keep your chest still. Push my hand out when you inhale. Exhale with your lips together like you're going to whistle. Let your belly push the air out."

Will does as Hannibal instructs him, though erratically.

The excitement and fear rushing through Will is riveting. Hannibal wants to sit before it all day and warm himself by its sheer heat and luminosity. Even without the inflammation of his brain and even without the stress and the anxiety, Will will always be a fire to Hannibal. He will always be a hearth and a pyre, the vital nucleus and the ruptured finale assembled in one ultimate, glorious being never again to be repeated or duplicated.

Hannibal counts eight breaths in and out before Will begins to relax. His frame slackens against Hannibal's body, and he leans into Hannibal's warm touch unconsciously. Once awareness begins to come back to him, he pulls away.

"What use would a snake have of a mongoose?" Will asks, catching his breath. He stays seated in front of Hannibal, shoulders rounded and back hunched. Their legs brush slightly, but neither of them move or acknowledge the slight tickle of warm skin on feverish skin.

"A snake teaches a mongoose to survive."

"By killing and eating other snakes." Will turns his head to the left but doesn't look full-on at Hannibal. He says, "They learn by killing and eating other snakes."

"Precisely, Will."

"Am I supposed to be your legacy?"

"I had hoped we would build one together, with Abigail."

Hannibal notes the shift in the air, the tension that settles into Will's shoulders. He looks down, chin tucked into his chest. There's nothing for him to say, though there is one thing that Hannibal can give him.

"She helped her father lure those girls, Will. She was the bait."

If Will had not just come down from a panic attack, he might have retained energy enough to be violent in the anger he clearly feels. This anger is not directed at Hannibal, though; he can feel that it tends more toward that pattern of thought Will falls into sometimes when he cannot let go of Garrett Jacob Hobbs' presence. He harbors a deep hatred for the man who took Abigail's mother and so many other girls before her; the man who left her in Will and Hannibal's path because even after so many imitations, he could not kill his darling daughter.

Will takes a breath and says without a question in his tone, "He made her do it."

In lieu of answering in the affirmative the way Will expects him to, Hannibal says, "A lie and a truth, Will."

Will laughs bitterly and mutters, sarcastically, "Yes, thank you."

His body is still taut with contained energy, with words left unsaid, but he eases back slightly and rests his other leg against Hannibal's knee. His rage will take time to wane completely, but Hannibal's touch has become so comforting to him, so grounding, that it calms him, whether he wishes for it to or not. There is something else that would calm him, too, that has never failed to do so in the past.

Hannibal touches his fingers to Will's back, tracing the vertebrae carefully, reverently. Will stiffens, perhaps knowing what Hannibal is about to propose.

"Would you like to, Will?"

It marks the first time Hannibal has given Will express permission without first being prompted to do so. Will turns and looks at him, eyes uncertain but eager, always eager, for the chance to dive beneath the surface of Hannibal's psyche and examine the complete mass that constitutes the iceberg of all that he is and all that exists within him. Will presses his lips together in a thin line.

Warningly, he says, "Don't think I'll be any less angry with you after."

Hannibal slides his arm around Will's middle and brings him to sit flush against him once more. True to his word, the hard edges and stiff lines of his body do not soften immediately. He holds onto his anger and that lingering sense of betrayal that, Hannibal supposes, he is in the right to feel, though he wishes Will wouldn't if only for the convenience of everyone involved.

But there is more to it than just that. Hannibal would have left Will to suffocate in this kitchen with only a furry entourage of canines to console him if it were limited to mere convenience. He wants Will, in every capacity, to understand what they have and what they must do to protect it.

He weaves his arms beneath Will's so they lie flat on top of Hannibal's and the backs of Will's hands rest in Hannibal's palms. His forehead tilts forward and lightly bumps against the crown of Will's head. He sighs, and Will does, too, a mirror and an echo; a reverberation of Hannibal's mannerisms, of Hannibal's presence, and of his physicality.

Hannibal remembers the Canterbury Tales, one of the books he chose at random when trying to empathize with Will in the library. He remembers a dream Will created to Mahler's 9th in the car with Abigail. He recites, "Yet in a garden yonder, at such a place you made a promise which you know must stand and gave your troth into my hand to love me best, you said, as God above knows, though I be unworthy of your love."

Will's hair brushes Hannibal's lips as he turns his head to listen as Hannibal continues.

"It is your honor I am seeking; It's not to save my life that I am speaking. I have performed what you commanded me as if you deign to look, you soon will see." He pauses to allow Will's tiny, nearly inaudible laugh. "Do as you please but think of what you said, for you will find me here alive, or dead. It lies in you to save me or to slay."

Will's wrists rotate; his fingers slip through the slots in between Hannibal's knuckles, sliding both hands perfectly into place where they were all along meant to be.

"It lies in me to save you or to slay," Will repeats thoughtfully. "The mongoose you want under the house when the snakes slither by." Will presses his fingers against Hannibal's with intention, and their hands lock sturdily together.

Hannibal licks his lips and waits, prepared to give Will as much time as he needs, but Will turns in his hold, their connected hands drawn about his midsection. Will's eyes are cloudy with an emotion Hannibal can't name and can't pinpoint inside of himself. The chaos erupting in the dense black spokes of his pupils belies the blank apathy drawn across his features. Will looks cold and mildly confused by the fact. His eyebrows twitch once to express that bewilderment, and then that emotion is gone, too.

"This is telling, doctor," Will mumbles through barely parted lips. Somewhere, not far from the surface, Will is pained at what he sees. For all that he listens, Hannibal only hears himself in Will's words. Will's judgment and Will's sharp perception resides in his eyes, where it always has. "You're calm because you don't care; you don't because you can't."

Hannibal doesn't know how to explain or inventory what *he* feels; a dull, ringing panic that scrapes against the inside of his chest, a sepulchral melancholy that settles in the bottom of his stomach and fans out like wind sucked into a house on fire and set ablaze.

His arms tighten around Will, for lack of a coherent response. He feels like he wants to bludgeon Will with the nearest blunt object but also like he wants to crawl inside of him and change this thing that he's seen of Hannibal that can't be true; or that probably would have been true in the beginning before this became real, before it became something he would willingly let himself be imprisoned, if only for a little while, to preserve.

"A truth," Will says, some of the light coming back into his eyes. "And a lie, *doctor.*"

Will was never under. He leers at Hannibal, the anger still very much intact, as he promised in perfect, unbroken English.

"It doesn't feel good, does it; when someone lies to you even though he says he loves you."

Hannibal still can't decide if he would rather bludgeon Will or crawl into him and rip him apart to understand what exactly constitutes Will Graham as a human being, as a monster among monsters. He thinks he'd like to do both.

"No, Will."

"You're taking me to see a doctor on Monday." Will removes his hands from where they were comfortably interlaced with Hannibal's and shrugs out of the hold he himself had instigated. "When the tests show positive for encephalitis, you're going to *treat* me for encephalitis."

Will gets to his feet and after a moment's contemplation, extends his hand to Hannibal to help him up. Hannibal battles with his urge to bat Will's hand away and takes it after a few sluggish moments of reluctance.

"You told me before that we're equals; you said that you meant it." At Hannibal's nod, Will amends: "Are we equals?"

"Yes, Will."

More now than they ever were, even when Will was at Hannibal's side tasting the flesh and blood of his kill, they are equals. Hannibal is annoyed and proud and stunned because he means it, at a much higher level than he ever thought he could. He doesn't have to say that he means it; Will knows. He can tell. He can always tell now. There is no going back.

"The next time I catch you lying to me," Will says, trailing off to swallow. "I won't take it sitting down, Hannibal."

They stand there in the kitchen not speaking and not looking at each other. Hannibal doesn't know what all Will's threat entails, but he wants to find out; wants to know the specific brand of vindictive, retributory beast he's lured to the surface that always dwelled deep within Will waiting for another to come and shake him loose from his bonds.

A yellow-haired dog pads hesitantly into the kitchen and noses at Will's leg. Will scratches him behind the ears.

"Stay for dinner," Will murmurs, the barely discernible lilt of a request evident at the end of the statement. It is hardly an invitation. Hannibal would not refuse him if it were.

"The lung, Will?"

"I think the shoulder."

"Excellent choice," Hannibal muses, watching Will tie a blue apron about his neck and wander haphazardly to the fridge. He can only speculate as to what more may come from these developments they have made.

Hannibal takes the apron Will hands to him.

“You deserved that, you know; all of it.” Will throws the meat in the pan to defrost it the way Hannibal showed him a few days before when they defrosted Gilbert Parish’s heart in a similar manner and used it to make Lasagna Bolognese. “Tempting me with access to your mind,” Will mutters with a distasteful shake of his head. “You have no morals.”

“It will displease you to know this, but I find myself quite interested in what will happen if I lie to you again.”

Will stares him down. He asks, “If or when, Hannibal?”

“I haven’t made up my mind yet.” Hannibal finds he almost can’t help the pert chord that rings in his words. A full breath shoots out of his lungs; Will has him pressed against the wall in a complete reversal of roles from where they were the first night they kissed in Williamsport, both of them fully aware and cognizant, outside of Peter-Herdic House.

They eye each other, both waiting on the other to break the silence. Hannibal has no intention of doing anything of the sort. Will wears his heart on his sleeve, but he is enigmatic; he is merciful, but he knows every which way that he might break a person down; he is angry with Hannibal, but he is intrigued also. He can’t help but be immeasurably intrigued, even if it is one of two things he was expressly wrong about in the very beginning when they first met.

Quietly, Will mumbles, “Don’t psychoanalyze me.”

Hannibal licks his lips. “You are a creature of absolute and unadulterated beauty, Will,” he says.

This was the other thing Will was wrong about; to think that Hannibal would find him any less than incomparable at face value, weighed and measured to just the bare bones of all that he could do and all that he could see in the world; all that he could see in and because of Hannibal.

“I like you very much when you’re psychoanalyzed.”

Will thumbs Hannibal’s hip. He is still clad only in his shorts, apron folded neatly in a heap on the floor where he dropped it. Will sighs and drops his forehead onto Hannibal’s shoulder.

“How do you treat encephalitis?”

“Bed rest, an anti-inflammatory drug regimen, and intravenous fluids to rehydrate your body.”

“I take aspirin,” Will says, somewhat perplexed.

“You also frequently miss sleep.” Hannibal touches Will’s flank where the apron cuts off and watches his eyes drift shut. “You don’t take care of yourself, gėlyte.”

“You don’t take care of me either.”

Will attempts to move away, but Hannibal holds him and catches his eye. He says, “I will change that, Will.”

They linger for a few seconds more. Will steals a temperate kiss and then moves away.

“See that you do.”

Hannibal watches Will run the carrots under the faucet and set to peeling and chopping them on his cutting board. Hannibal would like to replace the old wooden slab with a sturdier bamboo board; the coffee maker could do with replacing, too. He chops onion and garlic beside Will, thinking how he could get used to a domestic existence if it ever came to that. He hopes it won’t, but he thinks, watching Will’s practiced hands work with the knife, that he could at least tolerate it if he had to.

Will notices his staring and looks back. He doesn’t smile; he can’t quite make himself yet.

“I think you could be a mongoose, too,” Will says as he’s looking away.

“I suppose it takes one to know one, Will.”

Will turns the meat shorn from Gilbert Parish’s arms in the pan and returns to the cutting board. He wears a faint smirk on his face. Hannibal wants to kiss him, so he does, and Will lets him.

He *lets* him.

Chapter End Notes

“Absence” written by my Lord and Master, Pablo Neruda (*Love Poems*)

“The Franklin’s Tale” written by Geoffrey Chaucer (*The Canterbury Tales*)

Gėlyte >> Lithuanian diminutive for flower/cannibal lover boy/dinosaur babe

Works inspired by this one

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!